

Nintendo 64 ■ PlayStation ■ PC CD-ROM ■ Sega Saturn ■ Arcade ■ M2 ■ Online

Pac-Man
goes 3D
page 82

NEXT

GENERATION

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Sega's next big thing

Are Sega's **amazing** new arcade titles

Saturn's last **hope**, or the first sign of

a new home super **console**?

PlayStation's creator speaks

Ken Kutaragi's first interview as president of Sony

volume three

32

August 1997

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08 >



AM3's latest Model 3 title, *Lost World*, exemplifies Sega's position as the best arcade developer in the world, a contrast to its faltering performance in the home. But a new console in the works could change this. The story begins on page 16 and continues in alphas on page 50





Is Saturn facing Extinction?

Sega's hope-building merger with Bandai has **collapsed**.

Third-party **developers** in America and Europe are **abandoning** Saturn in droves. Saturn **sales estimates** for 1997 have plummeted to **only half** those of 1996.

Saturn is no longer the **system of choice** for most gamers. It's a distant **third**.

So is this the end of an important chapter in **videogame history**? Or is Sega willing to take one more shot at the unforgiving home market with a more sensible **3Dfx-** or **PowerVR-** based 64-bit console?

Whether Sega tries again for **hardware dominance** or becomes a software-only publisher, one thing is clear: **Sega's future hinges on its ability to continue delivering killer arcade content.**

With strong showings of late from Konami and Namco, and the conspicuous arrival of Microsoft and Intel, Sega could be witnessing the **first real threat** to its arcade stronghold. Every Sega game released now is **crucial** to the company's success. For the first in-depth look at Sega's latest arcade efforts see page 49.

NEXT GENERATION

August 1997

Contact

Next Generation
Imagine Publishing, Inc.
150 North Hill Drive
Brisbane CA 94005

Editorial & Advertising 415. 468. 4684
(E-mail: ngonline@imagine-inc.com)
FAX 415. 468. 4686

If you have questions about a subscription,
please contact us at:
Customer Service 800. 678. 3643
(E-mail: subscribe@next-generation.com)
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Diane Anderson hanging out
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Salmon, Marcus Webb, Mike Wolf

Photography & Artistic Contributors

Jude Edginton, Deirdre Griffin, Andrew Olsen

Advertising

Doug Faust associate publisher
Kathryn Herrick account executive
Kim Hansen ad coordinator
Larae Brown marketing

Production

Richard Lesovsky production director
Mark Eastwood production coordinator

Imagine Publishing, Inc.

Jonathan Simpson-Bink vp/pub director
Tom Hale director CD-ROM publishing
Bruce Eldridge newstand director
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Terry Lawson newstand analyst
Holly Klingel vp circulation
Kate Bailey circulation manager
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Brian Hostetler hardware hero
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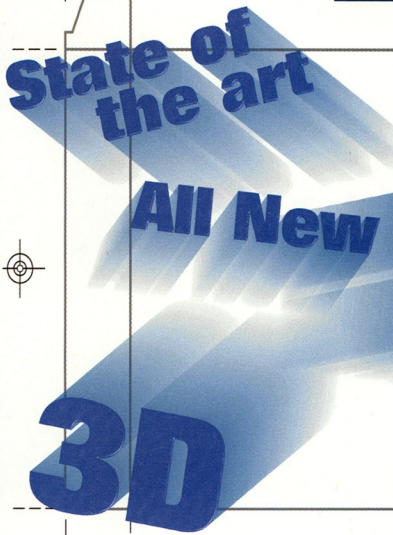
Cover Story: Sega's next big thing

NG looks at Sega's AM3 division, its upcoming blockbuster arcade titles (*Lost World: Jurassic Park* and *Top Skater*), and its upcoming Saturn title (*Last Bronx*). Plus, two AM3 producers — Mie Kumagai and Hisao Oguchi — talk about their work at AM3



08

34



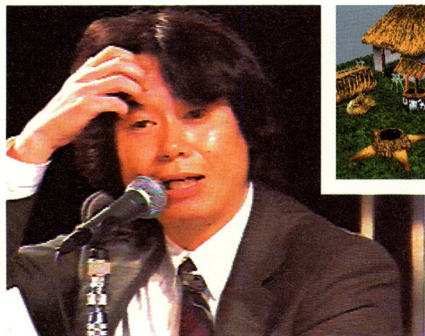
What's the father of PlayStation playing at?

Next Generation speaks to Ken Kutaragi, current CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America. In the face stiff competition from Nintendo and a possible new machine from Sega, what's in store for the PlayStation this year?

More than just a pretty package

We all know that image counts for a lot when it comes to selling software. How do companies get the most out of the time you spend browsing for a good game to buy? **Next Generation** looks at what it takes to make a game jump off the shelf

introducing



16

08 talking

The father of PlayStation

Ken Kutaragi speaks out on his company's future and what is he doing here in the U.S. when he should be in Japan designing PlayStation 2

16 breaking

News

Gaming news from around the world, including:

- 22 Tokyo Game Show (special)
- 26 Joyriding (online gaming news)
- 28 Arcadia (coin-op news and updates)
- 30 Movers 'n' Shakers (business news)

34 ng special

More than a pretty package

Why are we drawn to certain game boxes? Way more planning goes into the packaging of software in hopes of getting your dollars than you might expect. This month, **Next Generation** takes a look at what works and what doesn't when it comes to point of purchase

47 ng software

Alphas

Previewed this month: *Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Arcade), *Cardinal Syn* (PlayStation), *Tomb Raider 2* (PC and PlayStation), *Half Life* (PC CD-ROM), *Akuju: The Heartless* (PlayStation)

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Next Generation Online

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110 ng special

The way games ought to be

Exploring the cutting edge with Neil West: what analog could mean for gaming

113 rating

Finals

We separate the cream from the crap. Reviewed this month: *International Superstar Soccer*, *StarFox 64*, *Dynasty Warriors*, *Wild Arms*, *X-Wings vs. TIE Fighter*, *Emperor of the Fading Suns*, *Crimewave*, *Rush Hour*, *Hummer*, and more

128 now hiring

Do you want to wear jeans and forego shaving? Get a job — in the gaming industry

132 corresponding

Letters

Gaming paradigms on your mind? Get them off your chest by e-mailing us letters!

135 ending

Next month...

Want to know how to write a design document? NG #33 hits newsstands on August 19

News

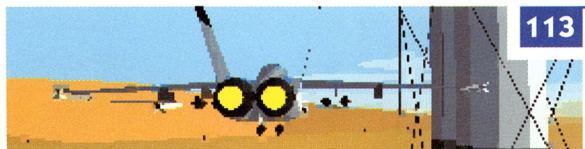
The Sega-Bandai merger collapses • Saturn's falling third-party support • Sega's secret Black Belt unveiled • Plus three famous Japanese game makers talk at the Tokyo Game Show



47

Alphas: More than 25 games previewed

Games for PlayStation, Nintendo 64, Saturn, and PC previewed. Plus interviews with two AM3 producers, a look at SegaSoft's Transactor technology, and peeks at Cryo and Hasbro



113

**Finals: 26 new games reviewed**

Every month, NG reviews each and every major new game release, so that you know which ones are the originals and which ones are merely clones

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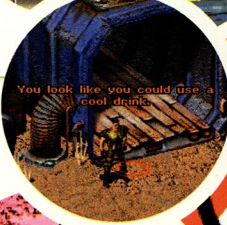


talking
Half Life with Gabe Newell & Ken Birdwell

finals
A searchable database of Next Generation's "Finals"



mac
Duke Nukem 3D, Fallout, Hind, & NG Screensaver



internet
America Online, Earthlink Network (Win), Heat (Win), The Palace, Tic-Tac-Chat

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Ken Kutaragi is both the genius who designed PlayStation and the rumored leader of Sony's covert PlayStation 2 project. He's also the new CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment of America. But how can he have time for both jobs? **Next Generation** flies to Hawaii to ask...



Photography **Jude Edginton**

What's the "father of PlayStation" playing at?

At the recent opening of SquareSoft's new Honolulu division (it's halfway between Tokyo and L.A., providing an ideal chance for Square's Japanese creative team to dip its collective toe in the American pool without losing sight of a top-notch Sushi bar), **Next Generation** got to chat over a bottle of wine with Ken Kutaragi, the new CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment of America. Despite this prestigious new appointment, Mr. Kutaragi remains most famous for being the man responsible for designing the world-conquering PlayStation. He is also at the heart of Sony's PlayStation 2 project, a bid to produce a 64-bit, possibly DVD-based game powerhouse for release (we expect) in late 1999.

So does his move to the U.S. mean that work on PlayStation 2 is complete already? If not, can he possibly do both jobs at once? And what else does the world's premiere games hardware designer have up his sleeve? **Next Generation** asked these questions and more.

In the beginning...

NG: How did your involvement with the PlayStation project begin?

Mr. Kutaragi: Just before PlayStation was born, there were the 8-bit and then 16-bit Sega and

Nintendo machines. And I was very impressed with these — I was a Nintendo kid, when playing with my son. It was very, very nice entertainment for us. At the same time, though, I thought that videogaming had the potential to become an even more entertaining medium, if the experience was combined with the power of an advanced computer. So I thought that at some point in the future we could combine the two and create a new kind of small console.

NG: So when did you actually start work on realizing this dream?

Mr. Kutaragi: We started the project at Sony in 1986. To begin with there were just me and two other people — just three guys! — and then eventually we formed Sony Computer Entertainment in 1993 as a part of the Sony Corporation. By this time there were 60 or 70 people involved — some were young, some were old, some were from Sony music, and some were from all sorts of other areas of entertainment. Now there are almost 1,000 developers working with PlayStation, and between 5,000 and 10,000 creators working with these

talking



Mr. Kutaragi shows off the blue debug PlayStation used for testing

"The objective was a high-performance, low-price videogame system which also had a design which was easy to write games for"

Ken Kutaragi

developers. So I am very, very happy with PlayStation and to have this opportunity.

NG: Which aspect of the PlayStation project was the most difficult to get right?

Mr. Kutaragi: The objective was a high-performance, low-price videogame system which also had a design which was easy to write games for. We wanted to get many software companies creating games, and so we had to design a very small and sophisticated operating system and develop software libraries to help programmers. These libraries enabled programmers to create games quickly and easily and also allowed them to write high-quality games in a short period of time. Balancing these three things: performance, price, and ease of use, was the hardest thing to get right.

NG: Perhaps PlayStation's most distinctive feature at the time of launch was its joypad. What was the thinking behind its design?

Mr. Kutaragi: The PlayStation gameworld is typically 3D, and so the controller needs the shoulder buttons to move in 3D space. So we added the buttons for the index and middle fingers but realized that this made the pad unstable, so we had to add the grips on the lower part.

In development, we simulated every possible joypad situation. We imagined what it would be like to have to continually put the pad down while mapping a game, or playing while lying on the floor, and many other cases. After that we had to decide on the weight of the buttons and the pad itself. We adjusted the weights one gram at a time and eventually found the correct balance.

We probably spent as much time on the joypad's development as we did on the body of the machine. Sony's boss showed special interest in perfecting the final version of it, so it has his seal of approval.

NG: How closely does the finished PlayStation resemble your initial plans?

Mr. Kutaragi: Well, 100%. The original idea was to make a synthesizer for graphics — something that could take a basic graphic and then add various effects to it quickly and easily. I wanted to develop a machine capable of displaying subtle effects without difficulty, and I believe we achieved that. I have a long list of things which could be used in future generations of the hardware, but in order to meet the low cost demanded of PlayStation, many elements had to be left out this time.

NG: So you were the chief designer of PlayStation (and have since been dubbed the "father of PlayStation" in Japan). But PlayStation's design was finished three years ago, so what have you been doing since?

Mr. Kutaragi: Yes, I was the starting engineer, and many times I have been called the "father of PlayStation." But I also work in the software department, so I have also been involved with the hiring of people for Sony's software development — and this has been ongoing since the PlayStation design was finished. And I try to hire nice people. It's good to work in a corporation that is made up of nice people.

NG: Nice people? You make Sony Computer Entertainment sound like one big happy family.

Mr. Kutaragi: Yes! [Laughs] Because the chances are that a nice person will make a nice product. It does make a difference. We now have very talented designers, sales people, and nice people in all areas of the business.

NG: So you have staffed up Sony's PlayStation project with strong, talented, and — let's not forget — nice people. Now you have moved over to California to run Sony Computer Entertainment of America, does this mean that you are no longer designing hardware?

Mr. Kutaragi: No, I am still an engineer. I still have ideas, and I still have a team of designers in Japan. So although I am now CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment of America, I still dream engineer's visions.

PlayStation 2

NG: So you still have engineering responsibilities. When we spoke to you last, in **NG 06**, you talked about the frantic final period of PlayStation's design and commented that, "At the peak, we stayed up all night for several nights in a row. We couldn't stop working because our work was so interesting. The only problem was that our office in Akasaka didn't have a bath in it. One of our employees didn't wash for two weeks!"

Because you were the chief designer of the original PlayStation, it has always been assumed that you would

also be the chief designer of PlayStation 2. And yet taking on a large responsibility in the U.S. doesn't seem to be characteristic of a man who presumably also has to "stay up for nights in a row" designing PlayStation 2 in Japan. So does your move to SCEA mean that the PlayStation 2 design is already completed?

Mr. Kutaragi: Now you are speculating! [Laughs] Yes, I too have read this speculation — and plenty more speculation — on the Internet. It's very, very, interesting.

NG: But is it true?

Mr. Kutaragi: No, it's not true. And it's also incorrect to think that I am only doing one thing. As well as being an engineer, I have been involved in the business side of things for many years. I helped start the company, and I have always been involved in business decisions. So it is not as if this new position is a radical new change of direction for me.

Besides, there are only five executives of Sony Inc. There is Terry Tokunaka, Shigeo Marayama, Akira Sato, Akira Tajiri, and me. And because there are only these five people who make up the core management team, there is a lot of rotation between duties. So everyone is skilled in many disciplines. In this way, we are a good team.

And as for my work at SCEA, Kaz Hirai, the current COO of SCEA, will remain as COO and this will be a great help to me.

NG: But you're still involved with PlayStation 2?

Mr. Kutaragi: I am head of the development team, so yes, you could say that I am involved. [Smiles] But I can't say anything about it.

NG: you can't talk about PlayStation 2 at all?

Mr. Kutaragi: No, sorry.

NG: OK, let's try a different angle. PlayStation was Sony's first dedicated games console, and obviously it has been a huge success. But is there anything that you would change about it? Or, if you could start the PlayStation project all over again, is there anything that you would do differently?

Mr. Kutaragi: Doing it again at the same time, in the same time period? [Thinks] No, I think I would release the same machine. It was a very focused machine; regarding the RAM size, the CPU, the controller, even the color of the machine — everything was

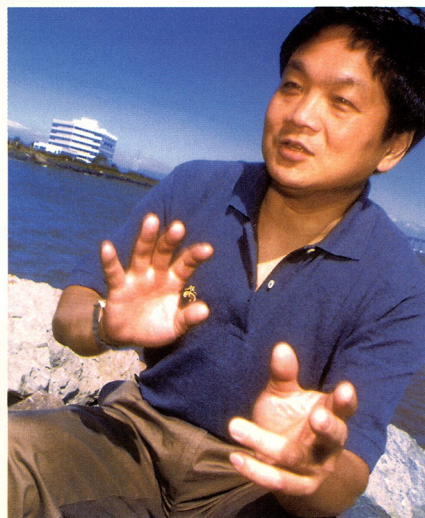
"I am the head of the development team, so yes, you could say that I am involved [with Playstation 2]"

Ken Kutaragi

there. It was and is a very satisfying machine. Sure, it would have been nice to, say, double the size of the RAM memory. This would have been very easy. But suppose we had doubled the size of the memory, it would have been very expensive, it would have cost more at a retail level, and we probably would not have sold as many.

Sure, Nintendo 64 now has a faster clock speed, but the ratio of clock speed to price typically doubles every two years, so it's no surprise that it is faster. But PlayStation was the cutting-edge technology of its time, and I am happy with it.

NG: One last try. In **NG 06**, we asked you what features



talking



you would like to include in PlayStation 2. You replied, "Two things. One is higher performance in computer graphics, because clearly, as a videogame machine, it's important to have even more spectacular effects. This will come about as a result of faster and more compact integration of silicon. Within ten years we will see vivid computer graphics on a TV screen generated by 0.25 micron silicon. These computer graphics will be

Formula One was, until recently, the most advanced PlayStation game. But it is only using 50% of PlayStation's potential

Ken Kutaragi

rendered at 10 million polygons per second — the equivalent of a movie image. But the most important development over the next ten years will be the widespread use of high-bandwidth communications, and future versions of the PlayStation technology will feature this."

Do you still stand by these statements?

Mr. Kutaragi: I'm afraid I can't comment.

PlayStation versus Nintendo 64

NG: So how is the PlayStation business doing, and what are the latest sales figures from Japan?

Mr. Kutaragi: The PlayStation has sold extremely well around the globe. The cumulative manufacturing number is almost the same as the installed base — we have sold as many PlayStations as we have been able to make — and that number is around 15 million. Even now we are manufacturing 1.5 million PlayStations a month, and this is a record high manufacturing history for Sony in Japan. It's higher than CD players or Walkmans ever were. And yet this is still insufficient to meet the demand which

continues to skyrocket.

I visited London last week and there were no PlayStations to be had — many people shouted at me to get more PlayStations! Yesterday, I was speaking to one of the employees at Square who told me that she had to wait one month to buy a PlayStation in Japan. And she works for Square!

NG: So how does this compare to how Sega and Nintendo are doing?

Mr. Kutaragi: Today I went to a hardware shop in Honolulu and I found that there was very little stock of PlayStation or Nintendo 64, and my understanding is that the two machines are selling at a one-to-one ratio all across the U.S. Sometimes we're ahead, and sometimes Nintendo is ahead on a week-by-week basis, but obviously overall we are way ahead.

In Europe, last month the ratio was two PlayStations to every one Nintendo 64 sold, and in Germany specifically — which is usually a strong market for Nintendo — the ratio was six PlayStations to four Nintendo 64s. In Japan, however, it is a very different story and PlayStation is selling a lot stronger than Nintendo 64.

NG: Do you have any actual sales figures to back up your claims?

Mr. Kutaragi: Yes, the latest statistics in Japan, from the magazine *Famitsu Weekly*, say that from Christmas to this week, sales of videogame hardware have been of the ratio of ten PlayStations to one and a half Nintendo 64s to just one Saturn. In Japan, every week there are roughly between 100,000 or 125,000 PlayStations sold through, so this means that if we are selling upwards of 100,000 per week, in that time Nintendo is selling 15,000 Nintendo 64s, and Sega is selling just 10,000 Saturns. So in Japan no one cares about Nintendo 64 and no one cares about Saturn.

NG: Why do you think Nintendo 64 has failed to make any kind of impact in Japan?

Mr. Kutaragi: They are too late; people got tired of



waiting for two years, and their timing is now wrong. Their other big problem is the pricing of the software. When you consider that a Nintendo 64 cartridge costs ¥9000 and that you can get a *PlayStation Greatest Hits* CD for ¥2500, it is easy to see why more gamers think that PlayStation offers a much greater value.

NG: You say that one of Nintendo's problems is that it was late releasing Nintendo 64, but this is partly due to it being a newer design than PlayStation, using more modern 64-bit technology. Will you acknowledge that Nintendo 64 is technologically superior to PlayStation?

Mr. Kutaragi: In regards to the graphics rendering portion, Nintendo 64 has an advantage. It has bi-linear and tri-linear interpolation and anti-aliasing, and this makes some of the graphics look very nice. Another nice thing about Nintendo 64 is that they integrated a lot of their chips together, and this is a very nice thing from a cost and manufacturing perspective.

But if anything, they have oversimplified, and other engineers have found that the Nintendo 64 system is very difficult to work with. PlayStation is a much more well-balanced system and is a lot easier to work with. This means that a game developer doesn't have to spend so much time getting to grips with the hardware and fine-tuning everything, and instead they can spend time on the creative side of making a game, and this is the most important thing.

NG: Do you think this explains why there has been such a shortage of top-quality Nintendo 64 software?

Mr. Kutaragi: I think so, yes. This and the cartridge model which means that it is a very, very tough business for publishers. PlayStation introduced a lot of new concepts to the videogame business, but Nintendo has tried to keep things the same as they have always been. Nintendo wants Nintendo 64 to succeed using the same concepts as they had for 8-bit and 16-bit — even the game characters are the same!

NG: Do you think 64DD, Nintendo's proposed disk-drive add-on, will give Nintendo 64 a new competitive edge?

Mr. Kutaragi: I know nothing about 64DD. They haven't shown it to me! [Laughs] But I think that CD-ROM is probably the best medium for game publishing for the time being. It's cheap and it is easy to make quickly as many or as little as you want. 64DD is some kind of floppy disc drive, and the PC market gave up on these and now uses CDs.

PlayStation's untapped potential

NG: How much unexploited power is left in PlayStation? If Nintendo 64 games continue to get better, can we expect PlayStation developers to keep pushing back limits also?

Mr. Kutaragi: I am always asking the same question to my engineers! So they have made a new weapon — we call it the Performance Analyzer — to test software with, to see how much it is exploiting the PlayStation.

NG: And which games push PlayStation the most?

Mr. Kutaragi: Well, for example, *Formula One* from Psygnosis is a great-looking game, but according to our performance analyzer it is only using 50% of PlayStation's potential. And this was, until very recently, the most advanced game. *Tekken 2* uses only 30% to 40%. But now *Tobal No. 2* uses 90% of PlayStation's potential. I was very surprised to see this, and they have done a very nice job with very little distortion. It's very stable and very nice. All games are different, and it's very difficult to measure this kind of thing exactly.

NG: And which developers do you feel have done the best work with making the most of the PlayStation technology? Aside from our hosts, Square, of course...

Mr. Kutaragi: Politically, this is a very difficult question to answer. [Smiles] But generally, Namco has done some great work and the software divisions within Sony have also.

NG: Are you worried at all by Matsushita and M2? On paper, the machine looks far more powerful than either PlayStation or Nintendo 64...

Mr. Kutaragi: No, no I'm not worried. I'm just tired of waiting. [Laughs]

NG: So, even if it's not going to come from Matsushita, what technological innovations do you think that videogame players will see in the next ten years?

Mr. Kutaragi: The next PlayStation, PlayStation 2,

In Japan, no one cares about Nintendo 64 and no one cares about Saturn

Ken Kutaragi

PlayStation X, or whatever, or Nintendo 128, or some kind of Windows-95 compatible machine from Microsoft — whatever new machines we will see in the future — obviously we will see greater graphics capabilities. Games designers always want the game graphics to look the same as they do on a workstation, and workstations are always improving. But the most dramatic new benefit and revolution will be in the synthesizing of human characteristics and creating a more human environment.

NG: Is this predominantly a hardware problem or a software problem?

Mr. Kutaragi: It is both, and it is a very, very difficult challenge. It won't be until well into the next century that this dream is fully realized but we will definitely see some radical steps forward taken in the next ten years.

NG: And will you be designing such a machine yourself?

Mr. Kutaragi: [Smiles] I'm afraid that I cannot comment on that.

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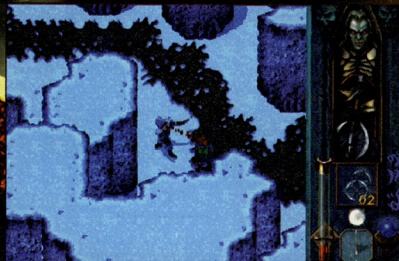
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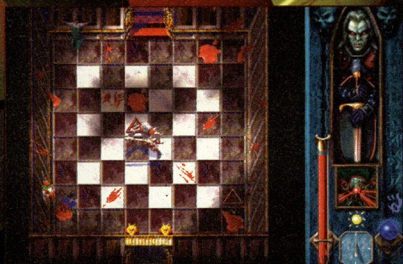
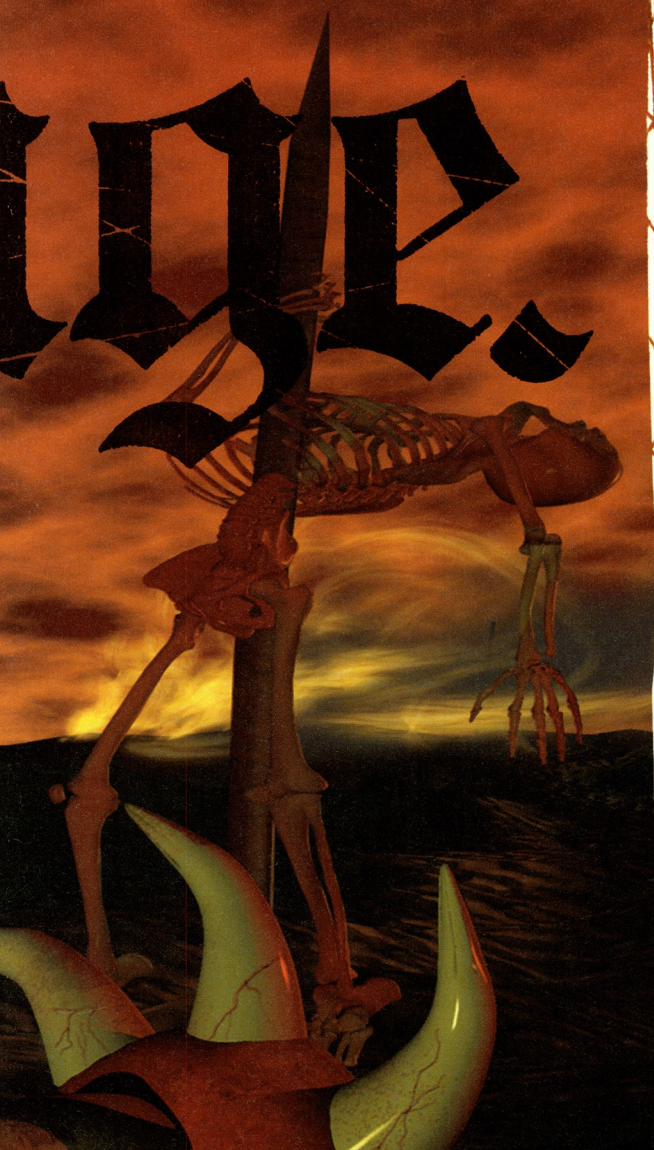
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Sega!! Sega-Bandai merger collapses: What happened and what does it mean? • **Saturn's third-party support dwindles:** Some companies are discontinuing their development for Saturn • **Saturn's Black Belt:** The story of a new home super console continues • **Plus** a chat with Miyamoto, Suzuki, and Okamoto

news

Gaming news from all over the globe

Sega and Bandai: a merger collapses

No more merger? Does this mean the end of Saturn?

The proposed multimillion yen merger between Sega and toy company Bandai has fallen through. The deal, due to come to fruition this October, would have created a new company named Sega Bandai with the latter swallowed up into the former. Strangely, Bandai's

Several game companies pulled out of Saturn development

board actually agreed to the merger at a meeting on Monday May 26, but then reversed its decision the next day. Now, however, the two companies will remain separate entities, but plan to work together as "business partners."

What could explain Bandai's sudden onset of corporate cold feet? It appears the about-turn came down to a letter sent to Bandai president Makoto Yamashina by members of the company's middle management. These younger employees were concerned that the cultures of the two companies were too different and that the deal would adversely affect both Bandai's own growth and working conditions. Yamashina simply announced, "We could not see a clear picture of the synergy, which is after all the purpose of a merger."

Some industry observers, however, have suggested alternative theories. Although Bandai's profits have plunged in the last year from 10.4 billion ¥ to a loss of 8 billion ¥,



Shown here are the folks on the *Ninja* team. Mercifully, Core is not cancelling its *Fighting Force* and *Ninja* projects for Saturn — yet

the company's recently introduced Tamagochi has already brought in a profit of 1 billion ¥ — a figure bound to increase over the coming months. It could be, then, that Bandai is now confident it can find its own way out of financial difficulty without the help of Sega. Whatever the case, Yamashina will be stepping aside as president as a result of the debacle, but will stay on as chairman.

The final theory put forward to explain Bandai's sudden change of heart is perhaps the most intriguing. Some industry pundits believe that Matsushita may be gearing up for a merger with Sega, and that this threat frightened off the comparatively lightweight Bandai. Rumors suggest that

Matsushita, which has had its eye on Sega for a while, may be interested in acquiring the company to strengthen game development for its M2 console. However, this theory is questionable since Sega has its own plans for 64-bit development (see page 18).

Although Sega remained philosophical about the break-up, it is the latest blow in a month that has already seen several game companies pull out of Saturn development. The U.S. branch of Acclaim, for example, has announced that Ocean's shoot 'em up *Project X2*, Take 2's *Iron and Blood*, and the company's own NFL *Quarterback Club '98* have all been canned for Saturn release. Other companies like Radical and Atlus have



Apparently, a marriage not made in heaven: the Sega-Bandai merger is off

also put development for Sega's system on the back burner. Ironically, even companies that do want to bring games out for Saturn are finding it difficult to do so. Crystal Dynamics has been unable to find a publisher to handle its Saturn version of RPG *Legacy of Kain* even though the game is complete.

However, perhaps the most disturbing news for Sega is that *Tomb Raider 2*, potentially one of the biggest titles of the year, will now not be released on Saturn. When this information was first released last month, many put the decision down to the machine's poor market share, but Core is not cancelling its other Saturn development — *Ninja* and

Fighting Force are both still penciled in for the format. When **Next Generation** spoke to Core, it claimed that the game would not be converted to Sega's machine because it is not able to cope with the vastly improved 3D engine. Others believe, however, that Sony is trying to tie down an exclusivity deal with Core which will mean the game can only appear on PlayStation.

Tomb Raider 2 will not be released on Saturn

Whatever the case, it's a serious blow for a machine desperately in need of AAA software support.

Core is not the only key software company to pull a significant title out of Saturn development, though. Bullfrog, too, has made the decision not to produce its highly-acclaimed strategy title, *Syndicate Wars*, on the platform. As head of conversions, Steve Metcalf told **Next Generation**, "It's quite simply not being developed because we don't see a market there which is substantial enough to cover the develop costs. In fact, all Saturn development has ceased at Bullfrog for the foreseeable future." Metcalf is also pessimistic about Saturn

development in general: "I think this is going to happen increasingly. We'll have to see what the price decrease does, but if you look at the market share, Saturn is way, way behind."

Although Sega has, in the past, sought to deny any problems with its 32-bit console, recent events seem to have prompted a more realistic standpoint. Last month, the company admitted it expects to ship around 2 million Saturn units worldwide this year — half as many as in '96 — and

says that next year it must concentrate on producing software rather than unprofitable hardware. It denies, however, that production of Saturn will cease altogether.

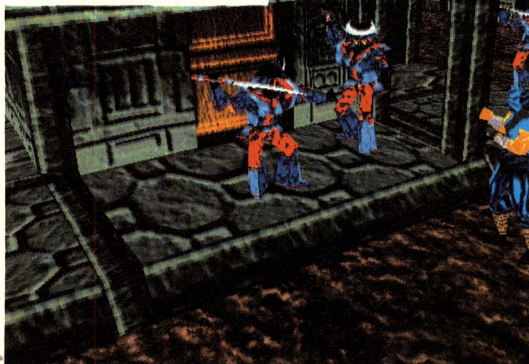
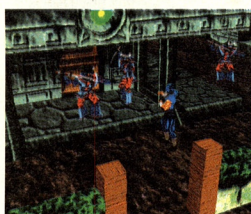
Reflecting this practical reappraisal of the hardware market is the company's recent decision to drop the price of Saturn in the U.S. to \$149 (\$169 bundled with *Sega Rally*, *Virtua Fighter 2* or *Nights*). This will bring the console in line with PlayStation and Nintendo 64 which have been selling at a lower retail point for several months. Sega has also cut the price of its NetLink peripheral by half to \$99 and has introduced a Saturn/NetLink bundle for \$249. Even software has been targeted in the price crack down: more than 30 Saturn titles have now been placed within the \$20 to \$40 price range (including *Nights*, *Fighting Vipers* and *Virtua Cop 2*), and no games will exceed the \$50 tag.

Many industry analysts feel Sega should have waited until E3 to make such an important announcement. However, the company has argued that it wants attention at the exhibition to be focused entirely on games, rather than hardware — a point which reflects its software-led business plans for '98.

But its not all doom and gloom for Sega. The price of the company's stock on the Nikkei index zoomed up when the Bandai merger fell through, and it made a profit of 2 billion ¥ for the fiscal term ending March 1996. It now remains to be seen whether titles like *Virtua Fighter 3* and *Resident Evil* can convert the fortunes of Saturn and halt its slippery slide into obscurity.



Tamagotchi sales should take care of Bandai's money egg



Look for Core's *Ninja* on Saturn. These screens give you an idea of what to expect from the game that will still see a release, much to Sega's relief

Top Game Developers Call on Microsoft to Actively Support OpenGL

Over 50 game developers released an open letter to Microsoft on June 12, calling on the company to actively support the OpenGL 3D API for games on Windows 95 and WindowsNT.

The open letter to Microsoft was signed by John Carmack of id, John Miles, Chris Hecker of Definition Six, and Mark Dochterman of Ritual (ne Hipnotic), among others.

Developers want the Redmond giant to give them the freedom of API choice, so the whole industry can benefit from technical competition.

Sega's next system: Black Belt

Details about alliances and chipsets are unveiled

Saturn's hardware has always faced problems. Developers have complained about a lack of RAM, complexity of development with dual CPUs, weak developer libraries, and lack of specialized hardware for anti-aliasing, transparency, and texture filtering. While these gripes are legitimate, Saturn's hardware was tailored to do games similar to the 16-bit generation and not 3D specifically.

As the life cycle of Saturn begins to wind down, Sega has been talking to developers regarding Black Belt (alternately known as Dural at Sega of Japan). From the initial information

similar in capability to the forthcoming top-secret "Banshee" (which is two to four times faster than current 3Dfx boards) is likely. Similarly, PowerVR's Highlander chipset is reputedly four times more powerful than its current PCX2-based PC offerings and also offers similar scalability through the use of TSPs (texture synthesis processors) and ISPs (image synthesis processors). The advantages to the PowerVR solution are cheaper design costs and the fabrication facilities to produce volume. 3Dfx's main advantage is the mindshare it holds.

Sources suggest that a system designed around 3Dfx is being designed in the US, and a PowerVR-based system is being worked on in Japan. Which one will eventually wind up on store shelves is anyone's guess at this point, but one thing seems sure: much of the OS will be courtesy of Microsoft.

Sega will provide a lower level abstraction layer in the form of a simple OS, but Microsoft APIs and tools similar to DirectX (with Windows CE elements) will allow for ports from the PC or even arcade.

Sources indicate that the system will have at least 16MB RAM with an additional 2 to 8MB of RAM for textures and audio. The CPU for the unit will either be a Hitachi SH-4 (not yet available in quantities) or PowerPC 603e (used in Sega's Model 3).

The image of a machine with nearly Model 3 power comes to mind. Benchmarks for Voodoo and PowerVR



Sega should soon be able to bring Model 3 games such as *Lost World* (see page 49) to the home

technologies already push roughly a half a million polygons per second while achieving fill rates of 30 Mpixels per second. Given that Black Belt is expected to at least double these specifications, it will be in the same ballpark as Model 3 in terms of polygon-pushing power. Current systems do support 640x480 resolutions (the maximum resolution for Model 3), but these modes are rarely used.

On the Black Belt, high resolution should be the norm rather than the exception for most games. Furthermore, both 3D technologies provide hardware support for anti-aliasing, transparency, texture filtering, and mip-mapping with little overhead. Home conversions of future Model 3 titles are unlikely to be exact, but developers say these games will be closer to the arcade than Saturn ports of Model 2 games.

Sega of America and Sega of Japan already have at least three games in development: a soccer game, a baseball game, and *Virtua Fighter 3*. Third-party developers will be receiving kits early next year and a system release is expected in Japan at the end of 1998.

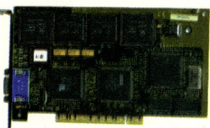
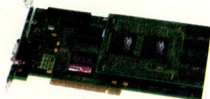


Sega has secured key partners: 3Dfx, PowerVR, and Microsoft

about the system, Sega has obviously listened to developer complaints.

Sega has secured key partnerships — such as a major deal with 3D chipset manufacturer, 3Dfx — for the creation of the Black Belt 3D subsystem. Sega is also pursuing a relationship with 3Dfx's chief competitor, PowerVR. Currently 3Dfx's Voodoo graphics technology is very influential, while PowerVR is playing catch-up. Both systems will figure prominently in the arcade. Intel and Microsoft have both backed Voodoo in their bids to enter the arcade race. Still, PowerVR's new Highlander technology will be basis of a number of competing arcade boards by the end of 1997.

Voodoo technology is based upon two key components: the texelfx and pixelfx units. The specifications for the 3Dfx/Black Belt version of the Voodoo technology are still unknown. Based upon 3Dfx's product schedule, industry pundits feel that a board



Both 3Dfx and PowerVR are being considered for Sega's Black Belt console

breaking

Can Saturn Survive?

As third-party developers abandon Saturn, Sega fortifies its position for the future

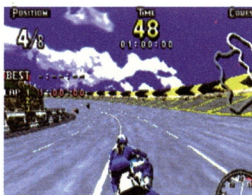
Sega is struggling with future development for Saturn. Key developers have dropped support for the system recently, which causes concern, considering that historically no system has

saying, "in terms of exclusives, all our in-house titles are exclusives, and we don't have to pay to have them. We have over 13 exclusive in-house titles this year and half a dozen third-party titles as well." First-party exclusives have been the heart of the system, but as Sega's arcade technology advances, perfect conversions of its popular arcade titles are quickly exceeding the reach of Saturn.

Companies such as EA and Capcom will continue with Saturn and have products that ship in 1998. When asked about assuring third-party developers, Sega responded, "Ultimately we offer a user base of 7 million users worldwide, and it becomes a money issue."

Companies who produce sports games, fighting games, and action titles that require little translation will stick with Saturn, but those targeting an American audience should filter toward Sony exclusivity.

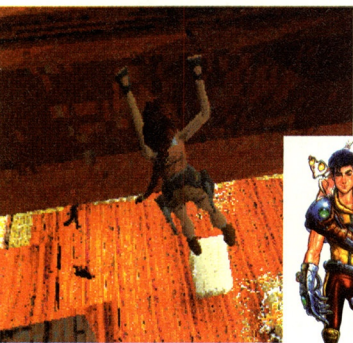
Saturn is not dead, but its development base will drastically change after this holiday season. Will the system thrive with exclusive first-party, and limited third-party,



Will first-party titles such as *Manx TT* keep the system alive?

support? Probably not, but Sega is showing no signs of abandoning its project until the next system is on the shelf.

ng



Don't expect to see *Tomb Raider* or *Wild 9s* on Saturn

survived without strong third-party development.

Shiny was one of the first to defect with its upcoming *Wild 9s*. Sony signed it to an exclusive publishing deal by offering a thriving user base and serious cash. Shiny's CEO David Perry stated, "I love Sega, but I think they are not supporting their machine to the best of their ability."

Core and Eidos expressed similar concern and have been approached by Sony. While *Tomb Raider* was the best-selling Saturn title ever, it got only a fraction of the PlayStation version's sales. Sony can offer exclusive deals that cover any possible profit from a Saturn conversion.

As companies leave, Sega has solidified its development base to insure a future for Saturn. A Sega spokesman addressed Sony's deals by



in the studio

Development news far from the rumor mill

Inside sources at Sega have confirmed that U.K.-based developer, Traveller's Tales is working on another *Sonic* game for Sega. After developing last year's moderately successful *Sonic 3D Blast*, Sega has re-enlisted Traveller's Tales for work on *Sonic R* for Saturn. Expected to be a racing game, *Sonic R* is one of two known *Sonic* projects for Saturn. Yuji Naka and Project Sonic are also at work on another 3D title featuring the celebrity hedgehog following last year's cancelled *Sonic X-Treme*. For those who are not familiar with the development house, Traveller's Tales has previously developed *Mickey Mania*, *Toy Story*, and is currently working on *Rascal* (see Alpha page 87) for Psygnosis.



SCEA has a team within its first-party software division hard at work on *Dark Guns*, a top-down shooter which one SCEA employee compared to *Loaded*. SCEA is also currently planning to bring its Japanese puzzle game, *iQ*, over to the U.S. sometime this year.

Activision is signing one hot title after another. The company has just secured the exclusive publishing rights to id's *Quake 2*. While the game is due first for Christmas release on the PC, a modified console version will follow. But Activision is not stopping there — at press time it had just secured the rights to publish *Nightmare Creatures*, a 3D action-horror game by French developer Kalisto. The game's demo level displays control and graphics on par with



Tomb Raider and offers the suspense of *Resident Evil*. Subsequently, bidding for the title had been fierce. Also, Kalisto has sold the worldwide publishing rights to its upcoming PC RPG, *Dark Earth*, to Electronic Arts. The game is due to be released soon.

MGM Interactive is the most recent publisher to catch the real-time strategy bug. Capitalizing on its *WarGames* property, this PC game is very loosely based on the characters from the 1983 film. The game is fully 3D and features an adjustable camera. A PlayStation strategy title of the same name is following, but will be distinctly different in design.

The first BMG Interactive titles have been sold off, as ASC picked up the rights to publish *Mass Destruction* (NG 23), and Electronic Arts has acquired *Moto Racer* (NG 28). Developed by NMS Software, *Mass Destruction* is a 3D, a top-down view tank game in the style of *Return Fire* due to be released this fall for PlayStation, Saturn, and PC. The PC *Moto Racer* is an arcade-style motorcycle racing game developed by Delphine. It is one of the first to feature 3D accelerator support.

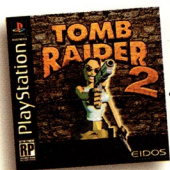


Figure 3-3

Signs and symptoms of shock



FACE - PALE, DAZED LOOK
EYES - DULL, LACKLUSTER
PUPILS - DILATED
RESPIRATION - SHALLOW, LABORED, IRREGULAR
PULSE - RAPID, WEAK
SKIN - COLD, CLAMMY
PERSON MAY BE ANXIOUS, OR PARTIALLY OR TOTALLY UNCONSCIOUS,
DISORIENTED



Dazed look? Dilated pupils? Rapid pulse? It's simply the body's way of protecting itself against games like Deathtrap Dungeon, Tomb Raider 2 and Fighting Force. And while the victims of this kind of emotional shock may benefit from counseling or psychotherapy, what they usually need is more playing time.

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breaking

Creators' Conference: Japan's top designers talk

Three great minds talk about games, influences, and raising sheep



Yu Suzuki, Sega (AM2)
Recent Credits: *Virtua Fighter 3*, *Fighting Vipers*

The following exclusive excerpts are taken from a conference at a recent Tokyo tradeshow. On stage together for the conference were (arguably) Japan's top three game designers: Shigeru Miyamoto (**SM**), Yu Suzuki (**YS**), and Yoshiki Okamoto (**YO**). Although the event was largely for novelty's sake — not serious discussion, these outspoken individuals always have interesting things to say, and the discourse gives insight into each of their game design strategies.

Q: Mr. Miyamoto, what points are you particular about in game design?

SM: It means everything to surprise people. Also we have to stick to the sales schedule.



Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo
Recent Credits: *Super Mario 64*, *Mario Kart 64*

Q: How did you control the pressure of making *Mario 64*?

SM: There was no pressure. The only time I feel pressure is when someone asks me if I'm working on *Mario 2* yet. [Laughs]

Q: What points are you particular about, Mr. Suzuki?

YS: I suck at playing games, so I make games that are fun for me to play. I've made three *Virtua Fighter* games. Next time it will be something different.

Q: You mean not a fighting game?

YS: That's right.

Q: What is it?

YS: Uh, we're still planning it.

[Smiles]

Q: Mr. Okamoto?

YO: Well, I can't give out any hints.

I suck at playing games, so I make games that are fun for me to play

Yu Suzuki, Sega Game Designer

It's really not about what I'm particular about, but rather what we (the R & D department) are about. I can tell you this, we don't come up with ideas that we think people are going to absolutely hate! [Laughs] There are target markets that we must consider. We don't make games for ourselves — I don't actually play games very much.

Q: Where do you get your ideas?

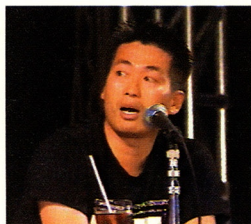
YS: From people or from scenery from movies (like from Akira Kurosawa movies).

Q: What genre of movies do you like the most?

YS: Chinese ghost stories.

Q: Do you bring any of your hobbies to your games?

YS: Skiing used to be a hobby, but I haven't made a skiing game yet. I can't golf or windsurf. Perhaps my interest in cars could make for a



Yoshiki Okamoto, Capcom
Recent Credits: *Street Fighter Zero 2*, *BioHazard*

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breaking



An interesting dynamic was created on stage as each of the featured speakers listened attentively to the advice of their most formidable competitors. Here Okamoto smiles at Suzuki



From left: Miyamoto, Okamoto, and Suzuki, immense talent on a common stage. An impressive crowd gathered to see these well-known and much-loved game designers together for a day

good game! [Laughs]

Q: What influences your game-making?

SM: The coolest games are made from trying to create an answer to why another game failed.

Q: What are some of your hobbies?

SM: Practicing guitar and swimming.

Q: What about *Zelda*?

SM: Uh, you promised not to ask.

Q: Will it be ready by the Fall game show?

SM: Wait and see. The work is going on favorably. *Zelda* will be a cartridge so that it can come out quicker. 64DD is coming along too, but there are games that need to come out first. They are our priority.

Q: How many projects is your team currently working on, Mr. Suzuki?

YS: Four. I am involved in two of them, but I'd prefer you not ask which ones.

Q: So you won't be doing any fighting games?

YS: I'll be directing some, but my main job lies elsewhere. I won't be involved in *Virtua Fighter 4*.

Q: What products is your team currently working on, Mr. Okamoto?

what would you create?

YO: I would like to make some kind of easily deliverable RPG.

Development on it wouldn't take long, it's frivolous, but it would be a game where you could have fun playing without spending a lot of time with it. It would be some kind of serial game. There would be a new part every month. If things were right with it, you could play for 30 years.

Q: Mr. Suzuki?

YS: I would reproduce movie quality images in real-time 3D. It would be like an interactive movie. It would also take advantage of some kind of portable screen that would be clearly visible outdoors, so you wouldn't be limited about where you can experience it. It may also involve some kind of link cable or other multiplayer option.

Q: Mr. Miyamoto?

SM: I don't agree with Yu Suzuki's notion of being able to play outside. I really think that you need to be sitting in front of a TV. But why are we limited to a square TV? A perfect screen would have no limits. That's my dream, if hardware limits are no

object — a limitless TV screen.

Q: Can you tell us what you aim for in making a good game?

SM: I make games for myself. I don't like saying what it will be until it's finished.

Q: Same question to you Yu Suzuki.

YS: Work hard and just do it. I like to leave it to fate.

Q: Yoshiki Okamoto?

YO: We try to make games are better than the ones we've already made. We take notes on each other's games. If there's a complaint, we fix it in the next game. That's really important.

Q: Did you ever have any game ideas that were originally rejected that later became games?

YO: *Street Fighter Zero* and the character of Sakura were originally rejected. Now I think everyone is glad they came out! [Smiles]

Q: Are there any plans or dreams you'd like to act on besides videogames?

SM: I only do games.

Q: How about you Yu Suzuki?

YS: The King of *Virtua Fighter 3* tournament. Its success is my dream.

Q: Yoshiki Okamoto?

YO: I would like to buy land in New Zealand and raise sheep. [Smiles]

Q: Any final thoughts?

SM: This year Nintendo 64 will really deliver. Good games will come out. Enjoy.

YS: It's fun to play games, but more fun to make them. We should start a company! [Laughs]

YO: Making games isn't always fun. The real fun is yet to come. There are many ways to break into the game industry.

Maybe he's not just dreaming
about chasing squirrels...



As your dog sits glaring at you while you're absorbed in the latest Only for Pentium®/Only for Windows® 95 release from Epic MegaGames, you assume he's just sick of waiting for his evening walk.

But perhaps a deeper, darker emotion lurks behind those penetrating canine eyes... jealousy!

After all, chasing a squirrel up a tree is good for kicks, but it hardly compares to a fight to the death with 800 pounds of bazooka-toting alien muscle.

Unfortunately, it's extremely difficult to manipulate a joystick when you don't have opposable thumbs.

Still, you can't blame a dog for dreaming...



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Joyriding

Gaming on the Internet

Many new services have popped up on the market this year causing fierce competition in this fledgling industry. Revenue models have shifted, and new technologies hide the ever-present latency issues that assault every service.

When the Total Entertainment Network launched last August, it was the first of a new breed of online gaming services but faced the harsh criticisms of questionable performance and limited title selection early in its lifetime.

TEN has remained a staunch advocate of the monthly subscriber charge model

Despite these early gripes, TEN refocused on new proprietary technology, ease of use, and exclusive content. TEN struck an agreement with Apogee, whereby all Apogee games for the next five years will appear exclusively on TEN. The *Duke Nukem 3D* exclusive remains, a year later, the most popular title on the service.

Jack Heistand, chairman and CEO of TEN, indicates that all developers will soon be seeking exclusive agreements with services for a number of very basic reasons. "When you put your content everywhere, you bifurcate your online community," says Heistand. "Once a product goes below a certain usage level, the product is dead online. It's analogous to going into a night club and finding no one there. Non-exclusive agreements lose their promotability. Services are far more likely to invest marketing and co-promotion dollars into exclusive titles. Over 300 levels were submitted in our *Duke Nukem* level-design contest, and the winner was hired by Apogee. Functions such as this motivate us to expand the life cycle of the product in a way that

gets the consumers involved."

"Developers have to consider a number of criteria when considering which service to choose. Who has the best technology? Who has the right business model? What service is the largest? Who has the best community?" says Heistand. "For the first time, the PC has the opportunity to advance itself above the game consoles by virtue of its connectivity. With more PC games, we need to try and find a model that provides some value for the publishers. There's

been a lot of talk of where that value comes from. Subscription revenue and advertising are part of that." While TEN already uses the advertising and subscription model, Heistand confirms plans for transaction revenue similar to SegaSoft's Heat. "Selling packaged content to your users and providing online-only content and upgrades are part of this element," says Heistand.

While Heistand's views are logical and shared by most services, some substantial differences in execution remain. While other services such as Mplayer and Heat have gone to a "free model" that depends on advertising for revenue, TEN has remained a staunch advocate of the monthly subscriber charge model. Initially TEN charged \$30 a month for its service, although it recently dropped its price to \$20 a month. Despite

TEN has a steady stream of subscriber revenue, yet is still not turning a profit

the monthly fee, its membership has grown at the same pace as its competitors.

Despite having subscription fees as well as advertising revenue, however, TEN has yet to turn a profit. "We are approximately a year away from profitability," claims Heistand. According to Heistand, TEN acquired more subscribers in its first four months of service than any competing service. "We have grown faster than ESPN SportsZone and Wall Street Journal Interactive have." But Heistand admits that the last few months have shown only modest growth due to a lack of new quality content. "Great games generate new subscribers. When *Shadow Warrior*, *Nascar*, *Twilight Lands*, and *EF2000* all come online, there should be a nice jump in subscription," predicts Heistand.

Part of TEN's community building is its over-18 policy. Despite pre-launch promises, it isn't

by **Christian Svensson**

Christian Svensson is the editor of **Next Generation Online**



strictly enforced, but TEN's membership is older than competitors'. Heistand admits that it is impossible for TEN to ID subscribers, but he estimates that less than 25% of TEN's members are under 21.

In the last month, TEN has put a lot of effort into relaunching a new version of its client software and adding a number of upgrades and options for its currently available games. The new version of TEN includes several communication options for subscribers, including paging and location features, and an upgraded latency-masking technology. The result is a faster navigating and slightly friendlier interface for members as well as fixing many of the performance complaints that had been leveled at the service in the early post-launch phase.

TEN has also added values to existing titles via special modifications. TEN has a number of special *Quake* modifications specifically for use on its service. Standard (free on the Net) Capture the Flag options are available, but TEN added special "lights out" options, custom graphics, and user-created

levels only available on there. This move is the first of many as services attempt to differentiate themselves from one another.

Major services are creating online-only content. TEN has secured the assistance of military developer Mak Technologies to create a space combat and exploration game and other online-only games available by the end of the year. Time will tell if these titles manage to attract volume subscribers.

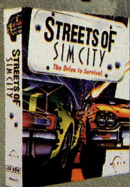
TEN is cementing alliances with publishers and developers such as Epic Megagames (*7th Legion* and possibly *Unreal*) and has agreements with Microprose, Apogee, and others. All in all, the TEN experience has improved dramatically since its launch nine months ago and promises to remain a strong contender in its market.



Jack Heistand looks for exclusive titles to get online gamers hooked on TEN

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The latest arcade and coin-op news

Acclaim's *Armageddon*: Awesome!

Acclaim Coin-Op appears poised for a comeback. The revamped firm plans to launch its first 100% in-house coin-op game this summer. The title is *Armageddon*; it just may take the industry by storm and by surprise.

The hardware system can put 60 megapixels per second on screen, using 3DFx components with random access to over 600MB of memory and 20,000 frames of animation. Gameplay is based on fantasy card game, *Magic: the Gathering*. Players choose from eight wizards who shoot energy bolts and conjure up hordes of monsters to attack each other. Each wizard commands four unique



Armageddon from Acclaim will feature nearly 40 characters and plenty of serious fighting action

monsters, yielding a total menu of 32 possible characters. Characters can fight the wizards and each other.

Each wizard can conjure multiple units of his monsters, so you can theoretically have 50 characters on screen at a time. Since each monster has totally different strengths, weaknesses, and fighting styles, *Armageddon* offers depth comparable to any four typical fighting games — by Acclaim's count. As we figure it, eight wizards plus 32 monsters equals 40 characters, each of whom can fight with 40 different characters at various times — for a total of 1,600 possible one-on-one match-ups. If you consider the possibilities of two-against-one, three-against-one, two-versus-three, and so forth, the potential variety of gameplay becomes absolutely mind-boggling. It remains to be seen whether *Armageddon* lives up to the hype. Look for it in arcades starting in September.

Microsoft, Intel, & Allies Plan Fall Arcade Debut

We've reported on Microsoft's campaign to get home video software makers to apply their talents to arcades, using Windows and PC-based hardware to present games on CD-ROM. Finally, some specifics are coming into focus. A handful of initial titles in this format — perhaps five or so — should be available by fall, with many more CD-ROM-based coin-op games expected to follow in 1998 according to Microsoft "technology evangelist" Jason Robar and Intel director of coin-op market development Albert Teng.

Early CD-ROM coin-op titles are expected to include such games as *Plane Crazy* from Inner Workings (a software publisher based in Scotland). GreyStone Technology said it expects to debut its first CD-ROM-based game, *Canyon Runner*, by year's end. Dave Adams of GT Interactive Software said that GTI intends to support the public PC platform by supplying game titles to the industry



"when the platform hits" — that is, probably by fall. GTI's exact titles and genres have not been determined yet, nor has its distributor network. However, GT Interactive has already booked exhibit space at a fall tradeshow for the arcade industry, right along with Intel and Microsoft.

More on the Way

Several well-known firms plan to follow suit with hardware and software that's part of the Microsoft/Intel movement — including Angel Studios, Interactive Light, Interplay, Ubisoft, Mango Grits, FASA, and Japanese arcade giant Taito in 1998. Sony will make PC-based pay-for-play games for exclusive use in its planned San Francisco super-arcade. All, or at least most, of these games are expected to run on Windows, and many are expected to use the Pentium II microprocessor chip. Several other major companies are lining up their hardware and software plans for the Microsoft/Intel movement,

by **Marcus Webb**

Marcus Webb is the editor of *RePlay* magazine



but haven't said so officially.

According to Intel and others, arcades will upgrade their hardware systems every six to 12 months to ensure that arcade technology stays "ahead of the curve" of what players can get at home.

At the April Computer Game Developers' Conference, Intel released technical specs for computer architecture in a PC-based environment (lots of emphasis on 3D capabilities). Also at CGDC, Microsoft hosted a seminar for at least 100 eager game developers. Attendees included employees from the likes of LucasArts and Sierra. Microsoft told developers that its DirectX software tool system — which translates home games to arcade-type applications — has some new features, such as a standardized way to handle force-feedback data and simulations.

PlayNet: Up and Running

This PC-based game system is already out in select public locations, ready to play. PlayNet Web is a small countertop-style videogame. It comes from PlayNet, the Northern California startup headed by "father of the videogame" Nolan Bushnell. Some 100 units were being field-tested by May, most often in tavern type locations. By the time you read this, up to 1,000 or more units may be set up and available for public play. PlayNet Web boasts access to dozens of Internet sites (mostly news- and sports-oriented destinations, though there's been some talk of making R-sites accessible as well). A menu of built-in video games is offered, too, all relatively low-tech and ranging from card games to simple shooting games and sports games. Networked tournament games and credit card payment technology will be activated for PlayNet Web later this year, insiders said.

ng

Errata: A recent column stated that Sega's *Top Skater* used version 2E of the Model 2 hardware platform. It's actually version 2C. Thanks to Kevin Williams at Disney Imagineering for spotting this

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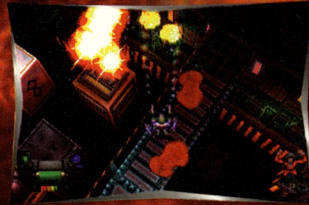
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Movers and Shakers

The business news that affects the games you play

SONY CHASES LARA

NEWSLINE: If Sony gets its way, *Tomb Raider 2* will only be available for PlayStation. According to well-placed sources within the company, Eidos has been approached with a PlayStation exclusivity offer for *Tomb Raider 2*.

BOTTOMLINE: If Sony is successful, it would represent a major blow against its console competitors. Obviously, the cost of such a deal is substantial for hardware manufacturers since they must cover publisher losses sustained through not publishing for other platforms. The potential cost of such a deal signifies Sony's conviction that *Tomb Raider 2* will sell hardware units later this year.

NEW PLAYSTATION ARRIVES

NEWSLINE: Sony introduced its new PlayStation hardware revision, sparking a retail boom, as pent-up demand was satisfied. PlayStation sales had slowed before the new arrival, as stocks of the machine dwindled around the country.

BOTTOMLINE: The changes are minimal, but important. Most significant is the removal of the RCA audio and video jacks. Instead, Sony has included a new cord that provides composite video and RCA audio output. Inside, the machine comes with a smaller board, less RF shielding, a cooling fan, and more air vents. These fixes sort out older problems and go some way to cutting manufacture costs. Retail happily received the new units and Sony was briefly rewarded with twice the sales of Nintendo 64.

SEGA'S UPS AND DOWNS

NEWSLINE: Sega's misery in the U.S. continued as it wrote off a shocking \$200 million for its '96 and '97 operations. The company also predicted that global shipments of Saturn would half (to about 2 million) over the next year, reflecting the firm's desire to concentrate on software profits as opposed to hardware losses.

BOTTOMLINE: Be that as it may, Sega's global sales look extremely healthy with

a 13% increase over the previous year. It's only in America where the news is gloomy. Many analysts are cheered by Sega's recent performance, its break-off with Bandai, and the possibilities of a new hardware generation.

THE NINTENDO-SAYS-SORRY SHOCK

NEWSLINE: Nintendo of America's normally cheerful chief Howard Lincoln was unusually apologetic in a general meeting with third-party developers. At a conference at its HQ in Seattle, he apologized to representatives for the notorious lack of attention paid to them by Nintendo in the past.

BOTTOMLINE: Over to Lincoln: "With the complexity of Nintendo 64 technology it is incumbent upon us, and good business sense, to fully support third parties through the development process. To date, I don't think we have provided as much support as we did with the Super NES and NES platforms." Nintendo duly unveiled a new initiative which will give developers technical support, particularly for 64DD games. Developers also received instruction on how to design for the Rumble Pak.

SALES HIGH, PROFITS LOW

NEWSLINE: Nintendo's profits for the past year were \$848 million — down 13.7 percent on the previous year. Despite a rise in sales of 15%, profits were depressed by the cost of launching Nintendo 64.

BOTTOMLINE: In the last year Nintendo shipped 6.12 million Nintendo 64s. Compare with Sony's shipments of 8.9 million PlayStations over the same period. Keep in mind that Nintendo 64 was only available in Japan for nine months of its financial year and in the U.S. for only six months. Units weren't available at all in Europe where Sony has a strong foothold. Nintendo is attempting to ship more than 12 million units in the coming year, but this falls short of Sony's estimated 18 million units for the year.

SHAME ON US?

NEWSLINE: Square made it abundantly clear that it would not be bringing

by Colin Campbell

Colin Campbell is the editor of *The Imagine Games Network*




Table 2 to the U.S. Square indicated that poor U.S. sales of the original, plus the larger job of translating the sequel (which has a higher element of adventure) forced the company to knock the U.S. off its plans.

BOTTOMLINE: Now you know why Japanese companies are loath to release some of their best games here in the U.S. Simply, because we don't buy them. In the meantime, Square's *Bushido Blade* — which is coming to the U.S. — will come with gory red blood. In Japan, the blood was a less sensational and perhaps more arty yellow. Somewhat depressingly, the public gets what the public wants.

M2 IS "ALIVE" SAYS MATSUSHITA

NEWSLINE: Confusion swept the industry following a report in the Japanese press that Matsushita was planning to quit the game business before it had even properly made its entrance. The word was that those who had hoped for a new console in M2 shouldn't be holding their breath.

BOTTOMLINE: Matsushita quickly morphed into damage-limitation mode after a report in the Japanese industrial daily *Nihon Kogyo Shimbun* that claimed Matsushita had scrapped the M2 console project and was preparing to close down its gaming division. The company immediately refuted the claim stating that the hardware is ready, along with ten complete games. Matsushita went on to suggest that the launch was simply awaiting a green light from company strategists. 

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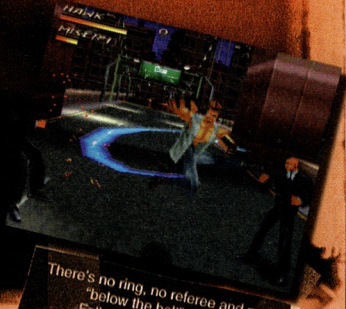
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- Hawk Manson

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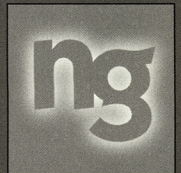


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74

More than just a pretty package





Despite what we might think, a product's success depends almost as much on the box it comes in as what's on the CD inside. In this special report, **Next Generation** deconstructs video and computer game packaging

Video and computer games — the best ones, anyway — are art. Maybe not fine art, yet, but art nonetheless. Video and computer game packages, on the other hand, are not art, they are marketing tools. They may have art on them, but if a great game package has ever been done just for the sake of it, we're unaware of it. Game packaging is designed to do one thing: sell games.

"We don't believe that the package is going to sell the game, but a bad package could certainly prevent a sale," says Sony Computer Entertainment America's senior director of product marketing, Peter Dille. Assuming, even for a second, that serious game publishers are satisfied with nothing more than a pretty picture on the cover of their games is like thinking of the Marlboro Man as just some guy who happened to like Marlboro cigarettes. Every nuance on a game package is used to target a specific audience.

In every successful game publisher's office, there are a number of people who care deeply about making great games. But there are just as many people (at least) for whom sales are far more important than gameplay. An important way these hard-working souls can achieve their goal is through great product marketing at retail, and very few methods are off limits in the cutthroat business of games. The game box is not the sole way to drive retail performance either; other methods include in-store competitions, standees, point-of-purchase (POP) displays, and even (of course) greasing store employees.

Though this may all sound devious, it's not really that bad. First, retail marketing is a fact of life; everything gets marketed hard, not just games. Second, it's often through product packaging that a great game that would have otherwise been left for

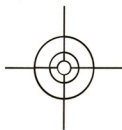
dead on the retailer's shelf is found, particularly if it's from a smaller publisher who can't afford to spend millions in pre-retail marketing.

But often the tricks are completely devious. Perhaps a game cover proudly displays a vast 3D battle scene with amazing explosions, but the game is a slow-paced and rather tedious war strategy-sim. There's nothing wrong with a such a game, but the marketing folks know full-well that this is a niche product, so they cloud its true identity to move units, particularly to less sophisticated buyers who may be unlikely to look past the cool picture on the front of the box (or the screens of cut scenes on the back).

Another common scene: Gamer Y is leaning toward a certain game or even hardware system when suddenly the store clerk mentions that system X is a better buy. Maybe system X is a better buy, but then again maybe that employee is just trying to get a free system X from the manufacturer.

The critical moment when a consumer is ready to spend \$50 on a game and has to choose from hundreds of titles is the "do-or-die" moment. "Packaging and POP are your final word to the consumer prior to a purchase," says Sharon Wood, executive VP of marketing for ASC. And, since most game publishers are not able to take advantage of mass market techniques to promote their products, the game's retail marketing has to pick up a lot of the slack. According to Eric Johnson, VP of marketing for Activision, "The only thing you can be sure of is that at the end of the day a consumer is going to pick up a box off the shelf and buy it."

So how do publishers make sure you walk out of the store with their game? Turn the page for the complete story.



More than just a pretty package

NG



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The cover

The primary goal of a game box cover is to make the consumer pick it up and look at the screenshots on the back. If the marketing department can get the box into your hands, then all their careful planning has already begun to pay off. Some publishers estimate that getting the consumer to pick up the box gets them 50% closer to a sale. The theory is simple: once consumers have a product in their hands, they begin to feel the power of possession. Even before any money has changed hands, those consumers know what it feels like to own the game; only by a conscious decision to abandon the product will they be leaving the store without it. So what can publishers do to make sure consumers pick up their box and not one of the hundred or so others screaming for attention? Countless theories suggest how best to snag the customer's attention, but in the end there are a few techniques that seem to pop up over and over again.

Line look

Inventing a look that identifies a game as part of a specific line is an extremely potent technique to successful publishers' retail marketing strategies. "A line look creates a scenario where the sum is greater than the parts," says Dille. Look closely at the PlayStation library. It

is not by accident that every cover has a black border with a white "PlayStation" logo running down the left side. Sony has successfully created a "look" for PlayStation software. In doing so, the consumer with a mind to purchase PlayStation software is led straight to the PlayStation section of the store without the complication of having to first look through competing software selections. Of course, it's easier to establish a line look on the console side, since the first party can set rigid product guidelines, but it happens to a lesser degree on the PC, within specific brands.

Within a rigid line look a number of opportunities exist to further brand and tie together specific products. This is step one in a marketing technique called cross-selling. If a publisher has a particularly strong sports line, like EA Sports, that company can brand its sports games with a specific logo or illustration style. In doing so, one successful title in the

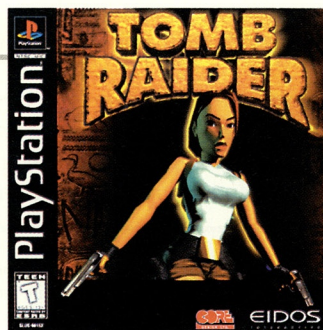
Getting the consumer to pick up the box gets them 50% closer to a sale

series, *Madden* for example, can help sell the latest installment in the *NHL* series by demonstrating a clear connection to that game.

On the console side, a rigid line look also grants a special advantage to the first-party hardware manufacturer by letting it break free of the mold for special games and thus attract extra attention to such titles. On the PC, though, every title is attempting to "break the mold" and stand out, which is why the PC game sections of software stores look so frenetic. Sure, all PC software *could* come in neat jewel cases like console software, but since it doesn't have to, publishers are generally willing to spend serious bucks on a big, empty box. Why? Because everyone else is, and if they want to be noticed on the shelf, they have to as well.

Image

The most important aspect of good box design is creating a compelling central image. Image, after all, is everything at retail. Defining what constitutes a "compelling" image is daunting, and therein lies the art of great package design. Andrew Cawse, senior digital artist at Studio Archetype, has created packaging for several Nintendo 64 games, including *Shadows of the Empire*, *Cruis'n USA*, and *Mario Kart 64*. He stresses that "all the images should represent the essence of the game and the characters or assets unique to



Creating a strong central image is key to grabbing a consumer's attention at retail

the game" and "should convey a high level of excitement and intensity with computer-rendered, 3D imagery."

One important consideration when creating the central image for the cover is the audience the publisher is trying to hook. For *Super Puzzle Fighter II*

from Capcom, the cover had to convey the light-hearted fun associated with the puzzle genre, but also capture the *Street Fighter* characters' appeal to die-hard fans. Featured on the cover is an image of Ryu in a fighting pose, but Capcom went with a super-deformed image of its well-known character on a brightly colored background to further distinguish the game.

According to Anne Moellering, Director of Marketing for Sega, "Every game has to boil down to a reason for being." In an industry that delivers countless racing, fighting, and shooting games every year, publishers use the cover image to convey what's different about their game.

With *Sega Rally PC* for example, it was up to Sega to let consumers know that this was not a traditional racing game. To that end, the image on the cover is a rally car flying through the air over a dirt track. This single bold image distinguished the game from standard track racing games.

Another good example of targeting an audience is Sony's *Cool Boarders*. While the industry standard for box art is computer generated (CG) art, Sony wanted to be sure that real snowboarders saw themselves, not an unrealistic CG image. So Sony used an image of a real snowboarder — complete with the hip wardrobe and attitude.



The line look for Saturn products helps system owners recognize potential buys

An interview with Paul Baldwin

The Vice President of Marketing for Eidos Interactive reveals some of the secret tactics of retail marketing

NG: What is the first thing Eidos does to get the retail marketing ball rolling?

PB: Creating awareness at retail is something we start several months prior to the product going on the shelf. This means targeting the store managers and buyers. Typically we, and other companies, create a sell sheet, a flyer, and a box comp. We then send them out to buyers. We hit them weekly or monthly depending on what the budget of the product is.

One thing Eidos does is send out monthly mailings to over 2,000 store managers. These mailings consist of a newsletter, sell sheet, and always some kind of neat little "wow" thing. Sometimes it's a poster or a free copy of the game. It could be free games for a year.

NG: What can creating awareness at retail do for a publisher?

PB: What we're trying to do is enlist the store managers — particularly at the smaller specialty stores where they have the same consumers coming in weekly saying, "Hey Joe, what's the hot game this week?" So we try to build awareness of the Eidos product line so that when the consumer comes in and actually asks the store manager about the hot game, he or she knows to recommend *Conquest Earth* or *Flying Nightmares 2*. [Point is] store employees are thinking about Eidos products. We find this works best at the smaller, specialty shops where a consumer can actually go find the store manager.

NG: What are some other methods for reaching store managers?

PB: One of the popular specialty chains has two groups of store managers that act as the epicenter for disseminating information about games. There are 12 members on the console side and, I believe, eight for the PC. They are a great source. What you do is send them the information on a product. They read through it, and then because they have the trust of the buyers and top brass, they can get on the horn and tell store managers, "Hey, *Flying Nightmares 2* is going to be great and it's something you might want to keep extra space open for and push a little harder because it's going to be a top title." We really target them aggressively. Other companies do it quarterly, but we do it monthly. Those store managers are your best friends.

NG: What techniques do you use to stress the Eidos products at retail?

PB: There's a whole a gamut of things you can do in terms of POP: shelf talkers (something that

attaches to the shelf and protrudes several inches out into the aisle) and standees are good. At computer superstores, you can use an end cap. An end cap is when you essentially buy a big space on the floor for them to stack a mound of your games. Also, to further highlight

The success of *Tomb Raider* was not because Lara Croft had big breasts



the Eidos brand, we've designed a specific box shape (the pyramid shape used with *Tomb Raider* PC).

NG: Is this kind of special treatment (end caps, extra shelf space, and so on) for sale?

PB: Yes. That's something that the sales guys take care of, but you can buy it. A retailer isn't going to sell you an end cap for a bad title.

These are reserved for strong titles. Everyone used to be able to do this. You'd hear a PC publisher say that they shipped out 200,000 copies of their game. Well, maybe they did but they probably paid for it all and then they all came back.

NG: Was the Lara Croft image for the *Tomb Raider* cover image really made intentionally sexy?

PB: It was definitely intentional how we positioned

Lara Croft on the cover. It's not unlike the approach that Sony has for *Crash* or Sega has for *Sonic*. We did this because it's a character-based game and it sets it up for sequels and peripheral markets like action figures and comic books. What we did by featuring Lara Croft on the box was one, explain the game and two, open it up for pushing the Lara Croft franchise down the line. It wasn't done by accident. In terms of impact for consumers, yeah I think some people stopped and were struck by what a strong, striking figure Lara Croft was. However, ultimately if the game isn't any good it's going to come right back (to the store). A lot of companies I know are making sexy female characters, and the reality is that they've always been around especially in fighting games. And so everyone is coming out with sexy characters but at the end of the day it comes down to how good the game is. The success of *Tomb Raider* was not because Lara Croft had big breasts, it was because it was a solid game.

NG: What's it like to work on different formats? Do you feel stifled by the size of the PlayStation boxes as opposed to the larger PC format?

PB: I don't think that stifled is the right word, but we certainly are limited as to what we can do. That's why it's so important to have one striking image on the cover of a game. It doesn't affect us too much because we try to come up with one central image that we use on all the boxes. In that way, the box is like the end result of the overall marketing process. We try to use the same image on our online ads, our print ads, and strategy guides so we're hitting people with the same image. It's amazing how other companies are using three or four different images for the same game. So when people get to the store they may be looking for a skull image (that they've seen elsewhere), but there's no skull because in the store it's a sword. And when you're dealing with maybe three or four seconds of a consumer's attention (in a retail environment), this just doesn't make any sense.



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In the end, no hard and fast rules govern how to create a successful cover image. Each game has its own strengths, weaknesses, and subtleties that must be exploited. Sega's *Nights* represented a challenge because the game's lead character was testing very young in focus groups. To counter this sales-threatening skew, Sega went with a nighttime scene on the cover to give the game an older look.

In Japan, *Final Fantasy VII* was released with a plain white cover and featured only the game's logo. This may not seem strange until you consider that the game's strongest selling point is its incredible CG art. The most important sales point of *Final Fantasy VII* in Japan was not allure of its great graphics but rather the heritage of the series. Thus the name said more about the game than any piece of art could have. When the game comes to the U.S., of course, the packaging will be reconsidered because the graphics are far more important than the name in America.



The dignified look of *FFVII* in Japan illustrates an important point about finding the right hook for each market

Most consumers are suckers for a game with good graphics

Logo

When creating a game's identity, a job that traditionally begins on the packaging, the logo must first be considered. With sequels becoming an ever more important part of the game industry, a logo developed today must be prepared to stand up to years of use, but that's not its only job. Among casual gamers, titles are not traditionally sold on the reputation of the publisher or developer, and thus the name of the game becomes the sole brand name of

the experience. In other words, very few people know to buy the latest Yu Suzuki game, but they will buy the latest *Virtua Fighter* game.

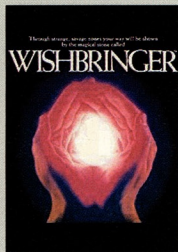
A good logo will be easy to read and recognizable. When asked about the responsibility of the logo, several publishers referenced the "six-foot rule" (of course some companies called it the 10-foot rule or the

three-foot rule, but you get the picture). The idea is that from six feet away a logo should still be easy to read and stand out against the

competition. There is no way around it — even the most important game is still going to find itself sitting on the shelf with hundreds of other games, and a well-designed logo will distinguish it from the pack.

A good logo also accurately conveys the attitude of a game. A grungy hand-written logo says this game is down and dirty, while a tall, thin, formal logo says class. *Tomb Raider's*

The Five Greatest Game Packages of all Time



Legend of Zelda (NES) (Nintendo) — An extremely inventive package that helped define the image of the game, *Legend of Zelda* came with a gold cartridge (a feature which was revealed through the die-cut hole on the front cover). The game also came with a full-color manual and fold-out map. This kind of deluxe treatment was almost unheard of at this point in history.

Wishbringer (Apple II) (Infocom) — *Wishbringer's* original packaging was a standard box (unlike earlier, more elaborate attempts, like the flying saucer packaging of *Suspended*), but it came with map fragments, an actual sealed letter, and a purple glow-in-the-dark stone. All the Infocom packaging, in fact, contained a good bit of support material — from ID cards to comic books. It was a high-brow attempt to thwart piracy — Infocom's disks may have been easy to copy, but to get the full experience of the game you would need all the extras.



id Anthology (PC) (id) — This special collector's edition included every id game ever created as well as a stylish black T-shirt, an id anthology book, id dog-tags, a pewter cyber-demon, and a nice poster to boot. The oversized box boasts a convincing weathered look and successfully conveys the attitude of id's game library.

Jane's Combat Simulations (PC) — State of the art in efficiency, the fold-out flap in *Jane's Combat Simulations* takes full advantage of valuable real estate by giving in-depth descriptions of the real technology represented in the game. The back of the box is no less useful with plenty of screenshots and feature listings. This is a no nonsense box, which may not work when trying to target arcade gamers, but it hits the hard-core combat sim fan perfectly.



Final Fantasy VII (PlayStation, Japan) (Square) — One of the cleanest covers of all time, *Final Fantasy VII* says more with a plain white cover and a bold classy logo than any image could ever match. This is especially impressive since the game itself is so well known for its dazzling graphics.



Indiana Jones-style logo, for instance, perfectly captures the style of the game. The psychological effect of a logo often defines a player's attitude about the game even before it is played. Publishers use this to their advantage in further targeting the right market. There is both a science and an art to designing good logos. Ultimately, a good logo will distinguish a game from its competition and will represent the experience of the game itself.

The back cover

But just getting the consumer to pick up the box won't guarantee a sale. Since most consumers only buy one game at a time, they're likely to pick up several boxes before finally deciding which one to purchase. This is when the back of the box goes to work.

Once a well-designed cover gets a potential buyer to pick up a game box, the publisher has the consumer's attention. This is when the hard sell is set in motion. The number one priority for most publishers at this point is to give potential buyers a look at the game.

Despite what we'd like to think, most consumers are suckers for a game with good graphics. Successful publishers know that this is their opportunity to take advantage of that. The important point to remember is that when looking at the back of the box, in most cases, a consumer has to take the publisher at its word. Whether this means buying into the overblown prose or believing that the CG-rendered images on the box are actual gameplay, rarely can a potential buyer actually try the game before purchasing the game, and package designers exploit this weakness in the system to the fullest, as anyone who has bought a game that looks great in the store but disappoints at home can attest.

Screenshots

The easiest way to sell a game is by making it look good on the box. According to Bob Schonfisch, director of creative services at Sega, "Research shows over and over again that the first thing the consumer looks at is the screenshots." The best way for a publisher to use this is, of course, to make a great-looking game and then display it, but this is unfortunately not the only way. A popular trick is to run scenes from rendered intro sequences on the box. Though most veteran gamers are familiar with this trick, less savvy consumers are likely to fall prey to this tactic over and over again and end up with games that simply don't deliver on the promises made in the store.

According to Scott Steinberg, VP of marketing for Crystal Dynamics, "Screenshots are the aesthetic reality check for consumers." But without sufficient experience in buying games, consumers often let certain screens give them an unrealistic impression.

To really get the most from the screenshots on the back of a box, a smart publisher will use images that carefully show all the important features in the game. If a

game has a two-player, split-screen mode, a screenshot depicting this feature is far more important than a line of text that reads, "This game has a really great two-player, split-screen mode." Videogames are a visual experience, and gamers like to let the visuals do the talking. A well-designed box also features screenshots that depict the very pinnacle of excitement in the game. Product managers may sort through hundreds of screenshots just

to arrive at four or five for the final box. Why? Because a single screenshot can convey several important messages about the game's features.

Why is this so

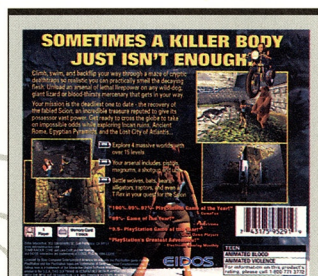
important? Because many consumers are still buying games based solely on their impression of the screenshots. Germaine Gioia of THQ makes this extremely clear: "If you combine the circulation of all the game magazines and assumed that there was no overlapping whatsoever, you still wouldn't come close to the total number of game buyers in the market." This ignores the 80/20 rule, which states that 80% of the purchases are made by the top 20% of consumers (the ones who read magazines like *Next Generation*), but she does have a valid point. Much of the credit for a sale belongs to package design and screenshot quality.

Features

After the potential buyer has seen the screenshots, it's time to read about the game's special features. Here, the publisher needs to differentiate its game from the competition. "You should have a single point that differentiates your game and then follow it up with sub-points," suggests Schonfisch. If it's a racing game, it's important to make it clear that it's not just like every other racing game released in the past five years.

Gamers want to believe they're getting a new experience, so publishers try to convince consumers that their product delivers that important missing piece. This is a great opportunity for PC publishers to stress multiplayer features and online service support. Furthermore, it's an opportunity to pull out the sales-talk thesaurus and find terms such as: "hair-raising enemies," "flaming debris," and "32,768 mind-melting colors." Screenshots combined with the box copy are the 1-2 combination of retail sales. If the exciting graphics don't grab you, the flowery language will. That's what the publishers are hoping anyway.

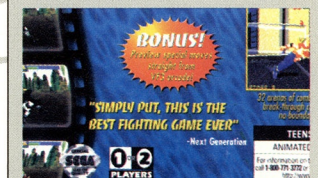
It's becoming increasingly difficult to sell bad games to consumers



It's all about getting the consumer to check out the screenshots



After the screenshots, a publisher wants you to read the game's unique features



A reliance on magazine quotes is a growing part of most publishers' plans

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Press quotes

Following closely in the steps of the motion-picture industry, game publishers are depending more on press quotes to sell their games than ever before. As the industry and gamers continue to mature, it's becoming increasingly difficult to sell bad games to unsuspecting consumers (a feat that used to be no more difficult than slapping a high profile movie license on the product). The reason for this change is that savvy consumers have become familiar with the tricks of the trade, such as posing CG images as game shots or using five seconds of Rob Lowe FMV footage to sell games.

To battle this new cynicism (a condition for which publishers of bad games are directly responsible), publishers have turned to the one place gamers still feel that they can get an honest opinion, the independent game press. By reprinting a quote from a gaming magazine directly on the box, the publisher can use the credibility of the magazine to bolster the image of their product. Here again, the game industry mirrors the movie industry: reprinted publicity quotes are often more than little snippets taken out of context which grossly misrepresent original editorial intent.

System requirements and peripheral support

One final must-have element on game packaging is an outline of peripheral support and system requirements. Gamers with Sega's 3D Control Pad or Nintendo's Rumble Pack are going to be instantly interested in games that announce added peripheral value. When considering PC games, the same rules apply. For example, if a game supports the new force-feedback joystick from CH Products, consumers interested in this technology are more likely to be automatically interested in the game no matter how good it may be.

Unique to the PC world is the need to list system requirements on the box. But even within these cold facts and figures, subtle techniques are available to smart publishers to use to their advantage. For example, it's not at all uncommon to see the Windows logo on the actual cover of the box, and then to go searching for the rest of the system requirements. The strategy behind this approach is to let the familiar Windows logo attract the casual or beginning user while not scaring them off with a confusing list of technical requirements. They know Windows, but they might not have any idea what the hell a "PCI Video Card w/ Direct X support" is. For

Packaging: from

A game's packaging and support POP materials can be designed any number of ways, but the following explanation represents the start-to-finish process of one product manager, Ami Blaire at Sony Computer Entertainment America, working with some of Sony's most important upcoming releases



The early concept sketches are used to explore different directions while trying to tap into the essence of the game



POP materials are created much the same way the game's cover is done starting first with rough sketches

From sketch to comp, several possible directions are created on the way to creating the final item



Once the final design is decided on, the design team creates a polished version ready for mass production

concept to cover

Step one: the creative brief

A creative brief is a concise summary of game's strengths and specific characteristics. The point of the creative brief is to help focus the positioning, strategy, and overall objective of a product. In creating this documentation for the game, the entire marketing commitment, ideally, is able to start on the same page and collectively work toward a clearly defined goal.



Once a few viable options are made the next step is to create a more detailed image

Step two: concept art

The next step in designing a game's packaging is to get the creative service department working with the design staff (either in-house or out) to create some preliminary concept sketches. These sketches are usually nothing more than rough pencil drawings that attempt to capture the essence of the game outlined in the creative brief. At this point in the process plenty of room is allowed for experimentation, and numerous possible avenues are explored. The object of this stage is not to create the finished cover, but rather to establish a few viable options.



Some near final images are made into comps for internal and consumer testing

Step three: creating comps

After the original concept sketches have been done and considered, the design firm works to firm up the sketches that show the most promise. From here, the next step is to create several "comps" (a mocked-up version of what the cover would actually look like) depicting the different directions created in step two. Once this is done, it's time to narrow the directions to just a couple of selections.

Step four: consumer tests

Once the selection of possible concepts has been narrowed to two or three, it's time to do internal and consumer testing. Focus groups have long been used by the industry to gage how closely its ideas are lining up with what the consumer is really thinking. Once all the opinions are in it's time to pick a final concept and set out to finalize the image.

Step five: finalizing the cover

Once the final image has been chosen and properly rendered and colored (or whatever special treatment the cover may be receiving) it's time for one last check to make sure that it delivers on all its promise. Provided that it does and everyone is happy with it, the game now has a cover. According to Blaire, "We want the cover to be compelling enough to stop people in their tracks." And looking at the finished design for the upcoming release of *Spawn*, they just may have done it.



When everyone agrees that the cover does what it needs to do, it's done

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One of the tricks of the trade is to use a foil finish to grab a consumer's attention in the chaotic retail environment

hard-core gamers who know their machines, the system requirements will not only tell them whether or not the game will run on their systems, but also how it might perform. The difference is that hard-core gamers don't mind having to search out information on the box.

Inside the box

Another technique used to sway the consumer at the retail outlet is through the promise of something extra in the box. This is where companies using bigger boxes for their games maintain a potential advantage over a company such as Sony that uses the standard jewel cases. Traditional items used to promote sales have been deluxe strategy guides, art books,



Anyone can create in-store posters, the trick is to get the manager to put them up

and posters. While some publishers see this a way to increase the value of their product and thus create new sales opportunities, many of the companies NG talked with all but dismissed the inclusion of bonus items as an unnecessary bother. But bonus items are not the only way to take advantage of the space inside the box.

Publishers have learned to take advantage of the extra room inside their boxes by using a technique called cross-selling. By promoting other games on the back of a manual or as a special insert, a publisher can reach a very specific audience, an audience that has already proven that they are willing to buy games. While this strategy may sound a little opportunistic, it's uncommon to find a gamer that doesn't at least to some degree appreciate this extra little bit of promotion. After all, if a game delivers a rewarding experience, most consumers will be eager to know what other games that company is responsible for. Since game companies are often unable to take advantage of mainstream advertising avenues, cross-selling is one important way to efficiently promote an entire library.

It's all about added value. What goes in the box is an important aspect of retail marketing.

Tricks of the trade

There are a number of tricks savvy — and sometimes unscrupulous — marketers use to

The game industry has managed to steer clear of the old "Sex Sells" strategy

sell their products. Amazingly enough, the game industry has managed to largely steer clear of the old "sex sells" strategy. This is not to suggest that a few companies haven't made an attempt to garner attention with a sexy silicon model on the cover of their boxes. What's left for companies trying desperately to get a consumer's attention amid countless other games?

Probably the most important marketing question of the 32- and 64-bit generation is how to express the 3D nature of the games. It's difficult, in fact, to find a game box or promotional item that doesn't have the 3D badge of honor stamped on it somewhere, but this is far from the only way to cash in on 3D. Probably the most obvious method is through the use of 3D-modeled art of a character on the cover. "The arrival of 3D modeling has revolutionized package design in both the PC and console markets," says Steinberg. Though



It's no accident that Crash seems to be jumping out of the picture. It says 3D

99% of the time the model on the front is far more sophisticated than anything in the game, 3D models are an easy and efficient way to brand the game.

Another common, but slightly more subtle, method is to position a character or car or spaceship or whatever so that it appears as though it's jumping off the cover and into the consumer's face (note the position of Crash Bandicoot's lead foot stepping out of the background). This implies that the game is not played on a flat 2D screen but rather in a completely three-dimensional environment

where a car really can leap right out of the screen. There are also more elaborate methods to achieve this effect with die-cuts or embossed boxes (found mostly in the PC market) which actually raise an image from the flat surface of the box to give it a true 3D effect. Some companies even create a custom box with multiple layers to convey a convincing 3D space.

Another popular trick is to use foil or metallic finishes. In a sea of black and red cover concepts, a shiny metallic finish makes itself known as something special and often attracts the attention of the browser before anything else on the shelf. Metallic colors, beyond just standing out in a crowd, are traditionally associated with prizes; thus a game in a shiny metal package is unconsciously registered as a cut above. A similar case could be made for the use of fluorescent colors or brightly colored stickers that highlight a game's cover design.



Cool Boarders uses a picture of a real snowboarder to get the immediate attention of snowboarding enthusiasts

Essentially anything that grabs a consumer's attention is a good thing, and in an environment of a game shop where the walls already look like a Technicolor explosion, this attention-getting takes an inventive touch.

Finally, celebrity endorsements still carry some cachet. A celebrity's name does more than just make it more noticeable on a retail shelf (a certain amount of credibility is lent to a product with a respected individual's endorsement) — it makes the product stand out in a sea of unfamiliar and often outlandish images. These and other more subtle

techniques come down to little more than just getting a product noticed. Once that's happened, the rest of the attack plan goes to work. And of course, these same rules and tricks apply to POP items such as countertop displays or standees as well as to game boxes. These effects may be subtle, but every bit at retail counts for marketers.

Putting the retailer to work

A less obvious method for ensuring better retail performance is to put the retail employee to work for your company. A retailer ultimately wants to sell games. Since profit margins are generally the same across the board, it doesn't typically matter much to store managers whose product gets sold. It's in the publisher's best interest to make sure that the retailer is eager to sell its particular product, and the methods for ensuring this kind of support range from copies of free software for store employees to free hardware for every x-number sold. Rumors of much bigger pay-offs circulate as well, but no one is willing to speak

over all others. While the best a third-party publisher can really hope for is maybe a rolling demo played on a retailer's mounted videoscreen, first-party publishers can actually provide the consumer with a unit and a copy of the game to try out. Even the PC market with all its successful shareware and demo business models can't provide that kind of experience right beside the cash register.

Contests are another way that any publisher, big or small, can create an advantage for itself. Through the use of a countertop standee and a few entry forms (provided that the retailer is willing to display it), a publisher can dramatically increase the potential value of its product. If a game promises a cash prize or a trip to Hawaii, potential buyers just might be swayed at the last second to give it a try. It's doubtful that any contest will lure customers to buy a game they don't want, but if a particular game was one among many they were considering, it could just make the difference.

Everything in the retail outlet is for sale

on the record about those.

Whether it's quarterly mailings (including free games and other good stuff) to buyers and store managers or personal visits, smart publishers are doing everything they can to make sure that the retailer is aware of their product and ready to sell for them. Though most publishers were not too eager to talk about their relationships with retailers, it's fairly obvious that pretty much everything in the retail outlet is for sale. Extra shelf space, stacks of games in the aisle, and a little extra push from the store manager are all available to the company willing to pay for them.

Alternative retail marketing

Traditionally reserved for bigger companies (console manufacturers and wildly successful PC companies), most retailers encourage special promotional items to help sell big titles. Perhaps the most successful method is the playable kiosk. It's the old "try-before-you-buy" adage at work. If potential customers can actually get their hands on a game before laying out \$50, they are going to feel much more confident about their purchase and more likely to buy a game they know first-hand.

This is where companies such as Sony, Sega, and Nintendo have a special advantage

Now that the strategies and tricks are revealed, how are we supposed to feel about being targeted this way? Well, unless you prefer some alternative to modern capitalism (and we're not here to tell you that you can't), we're pretty much forced to submit to the methods employed by game companies with a big capitalistic smile on our faces.


Compared to some other industries, the game industry is a relatively clean and friendly sort, and we should be thankful that we at least maintain the right to pick and choose our game purchases on the basis of nothing more than the quality of the product.

In the end, with the near countless choices in the game industry, no retail marketing technique beats a good old-fashioned word-of-mouth campaign (it's called the Internet, and it scares the hell out of every publisher in the business). In fact, most companies we talked to suggested their primary goal in marketing games is to reach the hard-core audience first and let them spread the word to the more casual audience. Think about this: while most hard-core gamers learn about the best games before they come out, a good retail marketing campaign (game package, in-store promotion, playable kiosks) is often the sole reason excellent games get the attention they deserve.

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A bold logo helps a product stand out amid hundreds of other titles on the shelf

A small tank is shown driving across a vast, undulating landscape of sand dunes. The dunes are a deep orange-brown color, and the sky above is a dark, clear blue. The tank is positioned in the middle ground, leaving a trail of tracks behind it. A thin line points from the text to the tank.

*99 bullet-riddled bodies on the wall,
99 bullet-riddled bodies,
take one down, pass it around,
98 bullet-riddled bodies on the wall.
98 bullet-riddled bodies...*

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Standard Max. Memory	8MB	4MB	4MB
DVD-Quality Video	•		
3D Acceleration (Win 95)	100M	100M	n/a

KILLER 3D PERFORMANCE

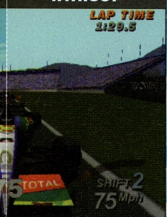
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Now You See It.



alpha s

Preview now. Play later

Sega's dominance of the arcade market has mostly come down to the talent of Yu Suzuki and AM2. Yet lately another division within Sega, AM3, has been stealing the limelight. See our exclusive previews and interviews with producers Hisao Oguchi and Mie Kumagai starting on page 49.

49 Sega AM3 *Multi*
 Why this division is chewing up arcades

59 Akuji: The Heartless *PS-X*
 Crystal Dynamics blends Gex with Kain

60 Cryo *Multi*
 A French developer breaks the mold

65 Cardinal Syn *PlayStation*
 Room for one more weapon-based fighter?

68 Transactor *Multi*
 A new SegaSoft technology takes flight

72 Zork: Grand Inquisitor *PC*
 One of the oldest adventure series runs on

76 Redline *PC, PS-X*
 Cars and gangs and action — oh my!

80 Tomb Raider 2 *PC, PS-X*
 Lara's back, and looking better than ever

82 Pac Man: Ghost Zone *PS-X*
 Guess who else is back, in amazing 3D!

87 Rascal *PlayStation*
 Traveller's Tales latest title breaks ground

90 Colony Wars *PlayStation*
 Psygnosis's smokin' new space shooter

95 Sin *PC CD-ROM*
 A first-person shooter with a twist


96 Hasbro *Multi*
 A gaming giant finally gets interactive

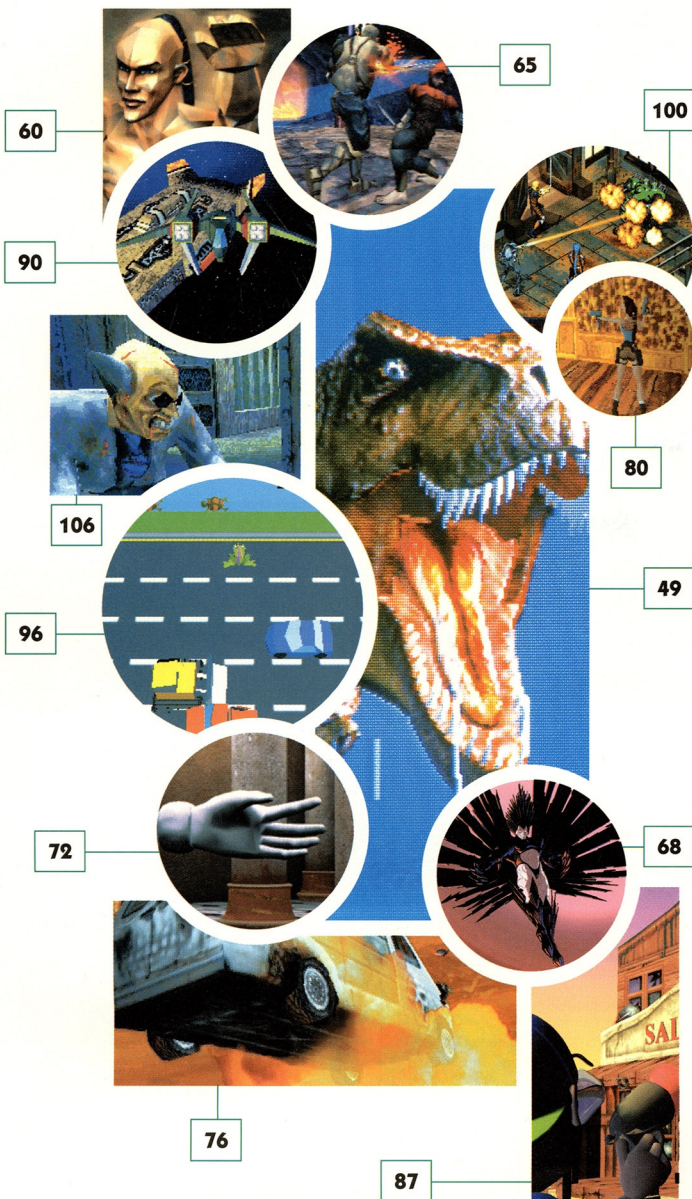
99 Crucible *PC CD-ROM*
 Maxis brings you *Sim Dungeon*

100 Septerra Core *PC CD-ROM*
 A console-style RPG arrives for PC

103 Nessa No Hoshi *PlayStation*
 Not your average adventure game

106 Half Life *PC CD-ROM*
 A *Quake* engine game with brains

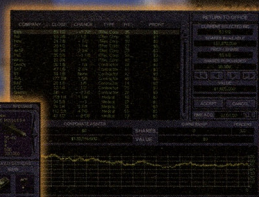
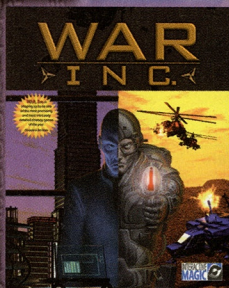
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AM3: Evolution of a Superpower

A few years ago, AM2 was indisputably the leading arcade development team at Sega of Japan. And with blockbuster titles such as *Virtua Fighter*, *Virtua Cop*, and *Daytona USA* to its credit, few expected any serious rivals to emerge. That was until AM3 began to hit its stride with AAA games such as *Sega Rally*, *Virtua On*, *Manx TT*, *Last Bronx*, and *Gun Blade NY*.

Now, as Sega faces its toughest challenges yet, from Sony in the home and Konami and Namco in the arcade, AM3 is rising to the challenge with some of its best games to date. Led by Hisao Oguchi, whose credits include such classics as *Super Monaco GP* and *Rad Rally*, AM3 has come out of the shadow of Yu Suzuki's AM2 team to deliver a more visceral alternative to Sega's traditionally graceful arcade heritage. Games such as *Last Bronx* offer the depth of the *Virtua Fighter* series but are less concerned with ancient martial arts tactics than staggering brutality. Where *Virtua Cop* featured two standard issue police handguns, *GunBlade NY* offers mounted machine guns.

And things are only looking up for AM3. Despite the loss of *Sega Rally* and *Manx TT* creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi to the newly formed AM Annex, AM3 is using its growing confidence to create even more ambitious titles such as *Top Skater* and the amazing Model 3 *Lost World* shooter.

What will this mean to the home market? Sega's intention has long been to use its arcade dominance as a springboard to success in the home. With a growing dependence on the powerful Model 3 board in the arcade, the idea that Saturn can manage ports of Sega's latest arcade titles is dubious at best.

It is far more likely that instead of being used to support the clearly flagging Saturn, the fruits of AM 3's future labors — especially with Model 3 hardware — will be used to help launch Sega's new console, which should be on par with Model 3 in capability.

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As the dust begins to settle from AM2's *Virtua Fighter 3* and *Super GT*, Sega's new arcade force finds its place in the world



50

**Lost World:
Jurassic Park**

52

**Interview with
Mia Kumagai**



53

Top Skater

54

**Interview with
Hisao Oguchi**



55

Last Bronx

Lost World: Jurassic Park

Riding a second wave of Jurassic fever, Sega's AM3 creates an interactive *Lost World*, which blows other light-gun games away



With the Model 3 board at its disposal, AM3 is able to create 3D models very close to those in the movie



The last time the *Jurassic Park* license was lent to Sega for use in a light-gun arcade game, the technology couldn't quite deliver on the richness of the story. Things are very different this time around. With AM3's (*Virtual On*, *Last Bronx*, *Sega Rally*) first crack at the Model 3 board, the team wanted to take another stab at a game with big dinosaurs; the dinosaurs aren't flat, bit-mapped creatures with limited frames of animation but are highly detailed 3D models with complex animation patterns and multiple hot spots for increased sophistication in the game's target and scoring models.

A landmark title in a number of ways, *Lost World: Jurassic Park* offers some very advanced game graphics, a unique theater setting with full movie-quality surround sound, and a complete lack of any exterior light for a deeply immersive experience. The game even features a hydraulically controlled seat that reacts specifically to each bump on the road or booming



Format:	Arcade
Publisher:	Sega
Developer:	Sega AM3
Release Date:	September 1997
Origin:	Japan

footstep of the mighty T-Rex.

Beyond the innovative cabinet design, *Lost World: Jurassic Park* distinguishes itself with complex gameplay. Using puzzle elements to determine the path taken, it offers the player a new kind of incentive and challenge dynamic. Solving quick and easy puzzles to open vital doorways, for



Lost World recreates the experience of being in a movie theater

Lost World

System: Saturn

Publisher: Sega

Developer: DreamWorks

Release Date: Fall 1997

Also showing up this fall under the *Jurassic Park* label is *Lost World* for Saturn and PlayStation. Very different in focus from the arcade version, this DreamWorks-developed title is an action/platform game with 3D characters. Unlike the arcade game, the console version of *Lost World* enables you to play as the dinosaur in a variety of different lush environments. (See NG 27.)



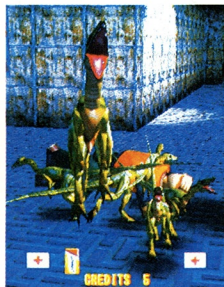
The mighty T-Rex is the crowning achievement in both the movie and the game

example, is one way in which the game challenges players to make their own way through the game. A host of skill shots put *Lost World* into a class of its own for shooting games (offering more advanced challenges than even the well-known AM2 shooters). Some of the inventive skill shots include Snipe Shot (the enemy's key weak spot is hit directly), Double Shot (a bullet hits more than one enemy by ricochet or use of a special item), Quick Shot (an enemy is hit within one second of showing up on the screen), and Trick Shot (a dinosaur is momentarily frozen by the sound of shattering glass and then quickly picked off before it regains its senses). Another innovative gameplay element is the cooperative two-player mode where players are given stats on how well they played together. Creating a game with this kind of cooperative play was an

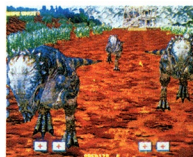
extremely important consideration for the game's producer, Mie Kumagai.

Dinosaur attacks really distinguish *Lost World: Jurassic Park* from other shooting games. Traditional light-gun games have enemies that pop up on screen and wait to get shot; most light-gun games feature armed enemies who can hide behind a box or a tree shooting back at the player. In *Lost World: Jurassic Park*, the enemies have no projectile weapons, but do have unpredictable behavior, speed, and the ability to attack in various ways. The player is constantly surprised by how the dinosaurs move, where they come from, or their speed. The environments also lend to this kind of gameplay model. With larger and more detailed playing fields, the dinosaurs are given the opportunity to attack in myriad ways, which keep the player on edge throughout.

To create an authentic *Lost World* experience, the developers worked closely with Spielberg's movie production team to capture the look of the movie and accurately reflect the story and characters. Though the game's five stages do not mirror the script of the movie exactly, they do recreate certain elements of the story and some of the climax moments. Whether through the immersive cabinet design, amazing graphics, or innovative gameplay elements, *Lost World: Jurassic Park* is sure to be in a class of its own for arcade shooters.



The variety of dinosaur attacks is the true signature of the *Lost World* game. Expect to be surprised and killed numerous ways while you play



The game loosely follows the movie, but has a few surprises of its own

An interview with

Mie Kumagai

Mie Kumagai is doing work most often reserved for male industry veterans.

As a producer in Sega's AM3 development department, she is responsible for such titles as *Rail Chase 2*, *Decathlete*, and *GunBlade NY* and is currently the producer of *Lost World Arcade* (AM3's first foray into Model 3 development). **Next Generation** met with Ms. Kumagai at Sega's Corporate headquarters outside of Tokyo.

NG: Tell us about your background.

MK: The first company I worked for was an art consulting firm. Next, I worked in the corporate office of a clothing company. But it wasn't what I really wanted to do. I wanted to do something that I could feel close to.

NG: When did you start playing games?

MK: Late. I didn't play them as a child. I started playing games when I started my first job. The interactivity surprised and attracted me. As for making games, I like the communication on a development team. That's what attracts me.

NG: Do you want women to play your games?

MK: I don't have any particular thoughts on women playing my games; I don't target women specifically. I understand that women have different ideas about what makes for good entertainment, and I don't have any wish to make them go into arcades if they don't want to.

NG: Does being a woman influence your game-making?

MK: I think I do unintentionally introduce elements that could only come from a woman's perspective. I hope women will play my games, but I'm not intentionally trying to attract them. I do, however, like to do things in my games that attract couples to play together.

NG: Would you rather create cooperative or competitive games?

MK: Definitely cooperative. I would like to continue to explore the idea of cooperative play in arcade games. I'd like to design a game where good players and bad players can actually come together and complement each other to target both core users and new players.

NG: How many women are currently working in Sega's AM R&D Departments?

MK: There are 62 women and 575 men. I am the only woman producer.

NG: How's the pressure at a company that's made such great arcade games?

MK: I don't try to compete with games designed for core users (*Virtua Fighter*). My job is to make games with an expanded audience in mind.

NG: How is it working with the Model 3 board?

MK: Since you can do more with Model 3, people expect more. The level of character development possible on Model 3 was once impossible. Now you can create highly detailed rendered characters. The specific challenge in *Lost World* was the movement of the dinosaurs. I was not limited by the hardware, so I had to make sure everything was just right — the movement was most difficult.

Lost World is the first Model 3 game done in AM3, and we didn't have a lot of time to experiment with it before starting on the game. Many areas still need to be explored. On Model 2,



I would like to continue to explore cooperative play in arcade games

my development team was well aware of the limitations of CPU speed, frame rate, and polygon count. Gameplay possibilities were not yet maxed out — there definitely could have been more done with Model 2 technology. Because these technical limitations are understood on a familiar architecture like Model 2, the gameplay is easier to concentrate on.

NG: How did *Lost World* get started?

MK: AM3 developed the original *Jurassic Park* arcade game. Dinosaurs are still a favorite game character here. When we heard about the movie, we wanted to develop a new game. With the new relationship between DreamWorks and Sega, we thought that there might be something interesting that we could do because of it. I had to present the idea to Mr. Oguchi. He liked it.

NG: What games do you like working on?

MK: This is my third shooting game. When I do a shooting game I incorporate new ideas I've

learned; this time I was really trying to do something new in the genre.

NG: What's the difference between *Lost World* and other Sega light-gun games?

MK: The main difference is in the distance between players and enemies. In *Virtua Cop*, the distance is very short and so the interactivity is very straightforward. They pop up, you shoot, and they die. But there are differences in the way a dinosaur approaches and attacks. I wanted to create a more realistic scenario with varied distances between the player and the enemies. In *Lost World*, when the dinosaur approaches from far away there will be different things that you can do. And what you can do in that time will be something new for this kind of game.

Another difference comes from incorporating different dinosaurs. They are different sizes and move at different speeds. Since enemies in shooting games move fast, we had to incorporate slow-moving enemies and keep them exciting. Hopefully what we did will help distinguish *Lost World*.

NG: What were the advantages to working with the *Lost World* license?

MK: Players already know something about the story and let themselves be immersed faster than if they have to learn a whole new story.

NG: Did you use any 3D models from the movie?

MK: No, we created our own.

NG: Tell us about the cabinet.

MK: I wanted to see something that would act like a mini theater. I also wanted to feature sound. I don't actually design cabinets myself, but I do come up with the basic ideas for them.

NG: Are you interested in consumer games?

MK: Yes. The entire arcade experience has to be delivered in two to three minutes; in a consumer game, you have time to incorporate more ideas.

NG: When you create games do you think exclusively of the Japanese market?

MK: No. I like to make games for different people. When I designed *GunBlade NY*, for example, I really had Americans in mind.

NG: What is the next technological step in arcade development?

MK: I would like to see the home and arcade more connected; it's a top priority for our R&D departments. With new entertainment centers like GameWorks, we also have to think about larger, location-based attractions.



ng alphas

Top Skater

Given skateboarding's recent revival, AM3's latest project comes at perfect cash-in time. And, given *Top Skater*'s design and overall concept, it seems to have been developed almost solely with the American and European markets in mind — two places where the interest in skateboarding is most notable. This is apparent in the character designs, skater's fashions, and locations portrayed.

Format:	Arcade
Publisher:	Sega
Developer:	Sega AM3
Release Date:	Fall 1997
Origin:	Japan

Sega's desire to reignite American's interest in the arcade is made crystal clear by this innovative Western-style skateboarding game



Going fast isn't the only aim of the game; performing radical tricks is the main goal of AM3's *Top Skater*



The game offers a large variety of terrains including street, ramps, and swimming pools — much like real skating scenarios

Similar to Namco's *Alpine Surfer*, *Top Skater* features a mock skateboard that the

player stands on and manipulates by adjusting body weight on the board. Jumps are achieved by leaning on the back and releasing pressure on the front. Possible tricks, however, are not limited to jumping. Good players will find several stunts to perform. It's this kind of location-based arcade game that Sega's AM departments are currently focusing on.

While the circuits give *Top Skater* the look of a racing game, its core gameplay centers around stunts and getting bonus items to boost one's score. The idea was to cash in on some of the sport's style and flashy tricks. Varied environments such as city streets, ramps, and swimming pools reflect the places skaters most prefer. The game also lets the player choose from six characters with different attributes.

Despite being powered by Sega's dated Model 2 technology, *Top Skater* still manages to impress with some stunning visuals, and a unique brand of rewarding gameplay.



Top Skater proves again that Model 2 still has some life in it

An interview with

Hisao Oguchi

Hisao Oguchi joined Sega in 1984. Having produced

landmark games such as

Heavyweight Champ and *Super Monaco GP*, he has since spent the past four years in AM3 overseeing the creation of games such as *Sega Rally*, *Gunblade NY*, *Manx TT*, *Virtual On*, *Last Bronx*, and most recently *Top Skater*. **Next**

Generation met with Mr. Oguchi recently at the company's Tokyo HQ and quizzed him about working for Sega and the future of the division.

NG: What made you choose to work for Sega?

HO: After studying engineering I initially applied to both Namco and Sega. I was taken on immediately by Sega, so I didn't think about other companies. Nintendo is based in Kyoto, so I didn't actually make it all the way down there. [Laughs]

NG: Why the videogame industry?

HO: I wanted to work in the entertainment field, and I used to build my own games and toys at home with whatever I could lay my hands on.

NG: So you were a game otaku, then?

HO: No, but when I was a child I used to go to game centers located on the upper floors of department stores, and I loved games very much. I knew the Sega brand even when I was very young — I was always in awe of the company's games. When I initially entered Sega I was disappointed when I discovered how small it was. However, it started to grow soon after.

NG: So you initially started with AM1?

HO: When I entered Sega 14 years ago only one development department produced arcade and consumer games. The first project I worked on was the SG3000 [Sega Master System]. I did the project planning for it. My first proper game was *Doki Doki Penguin*. Then I did some medal [redemption] games — I was the director on a derby game called *Super Derby*. Then did *Super Monaco GP*, *Rad Rally*, and *Heavyweight Champ*. I stayed in AM1 before going to AM3.

NG: What sort of games (other than Sega's) do you like?

HO: I like games like *Persona* and *Final Fantasy VII*. I also love old Namco games like *Xevious* and *Galaxian*. When I first saw

Xevious I was very impressed because previously backgrounds in games had been black and this was one of the first to introduce full color.

NG: Is it difficult to make rigid deadlines and manage the staff's passion for games?

HO: Creators who don't play games cannot understand what's enjoyable. So there is time for playing and time for working. But we cannot

spend all our time playing, of course [Laughs].

NG: How do you cultivate creativity?

HO: I sometimes come up with the initial ideas, but most of the time several people propose them. I try to avoid passing comments on early projects and instead let them develop freely and progressively. Of course, there are some cost constraints and I need to be able to make a decision and say "stop" if it is necessary. In this respect a project is like an egg — I don't say anything until it is hatching. That is the AM3 way and our strongest asset. I don't believe in domineering directors. Instead I give recommendations to the staff, and I don't order them to do everything my way. I don't know



I want to make games that facilitate human communication

about other departments. AM3 is very much like a university laboratory.

NG: How do you see AM3 in ten years?

HO: I imagine games will be a means of communication. You can play a game on your own, but I want to make games that facilitate human communication. It's interesting to watch the communication between fathers and sons or

between boyfriends and girlfriends. Even though *Top Skater* is a one-player game, the player communicates with the audience. People watching enjoy the game, too.

NG: AM3 has covered nearly all the arcade genres. What's AM3's strength?

HO: AM3 doesn't have any specialist genre. Our first goal is to do whatever looks interesting. We want to make games different from console games. We want to make games like *Top Skater*, games that can be released only in game centers.

NG: What have you achieved with *Top Skater*?

HO: The main objective of most arcade games is to trounce the opponent and win. The objective of *Top Skater* is to pull off cool stunts. This seems to be the most important difference. You have to race and be as cool as possible. The player has to interact with the people watching. It is very gratifying to have good feedback from the audience after completing a cool race. It is being on stage — you impress the audience and establish a rapport. *Top Skater* can offer all this.

NG: So was *Top Skater* developed with the Japanese market in mind?

HO: It fits better with U.S. tastes. I went to a show in Las Vegas a few days ago, and Americans immediately understood the game. It seems that Americans will enjoy the game much more than Japanese.

Rollerblading and skateboarding are hugely popular in the U.S. so it was the best place to carry out research. But we did a lot of the research in Japan, attending skateboarding championships. We analyzed a lot of videos for inspiration and looked at snowboarding, too.

NG: How does Model 3 figure in AM3's future development plans as a whole?

HO: We'll work with Model 3. Model 2 was expensive but became cheap fast. It should be

the same with Model 3. We are not abandoning Model 2. We will use it and some cheaper boards such as the ST-V.

NG: What game would you like to make?

HO: Most games are based on digital controls. I want to create more analog games in which the result of a player's actions is not necessarily "right" or "wrong." The feeling and enjoyment needs to be more varied, so the player can experiment and discover through trial and error. Analog control is an area I'd want to invest heavily in.



ng alphas

Last Bronx



The weapons are the main differentiating factor in *Last Bronx*

Rleased in the arcades just a few weeks before the incomparable *Virtua Fighter 3*, *Last Bronx*, AM3's first foray into fighting, was largely overshadowed by the long anticipated Model 3 masterpiece. Created on the Model 2 board, *Last Bronx* serves as a down-and-dirty answer to the squeaky clean image of the VF series. The eight characters in the game are less concerned with ancient martial arts and honorable fighting codes than with beating each other to death with blunt objects.

Even the environments are a touch grittier than VF's. The matches take place in realistic urban environments (ironically, however, not in the Bronx) and reflect some actual geographic hot spots in Tokyo. One match, for example, is set in a very busy intersection of Shibuya, a popular youth hangout in Tokyo with no shortage of Sega arcades, which creates the possibility of playing the game just a few feet away from the game's virtual setting.

Recently made popular by efforts such as *Soul Blade* and *Dynasty Warriors*, weapons-based fighting games are slowly finding their place in the world

of one-on-one brawlers. *Last Bronx* features eight different weapons suitably matched with each of the game's rough-and-tumble characters. The weapons range from police batons to



Using a combination of 2D and 3D backgrounds, Saturn's *Last Bronx* manages a very close resemblance to the arcade version

Sega's first weapons-based fighting game proves to be a brutal departure from the clean, classic tradition of the *Virtua Fighter* series

Format:	Saturn
Publisher:	Sega
Developer:	Sega AM3
Release Date:	Fall 1997
Origin:	Japan



After the low resolution versions of *Fighting Vipers* and *Megamix*, AM3 was eager to create a high resolution version of its game

a sledgehammer, and characters have special moves designed around the strength of their weapons.

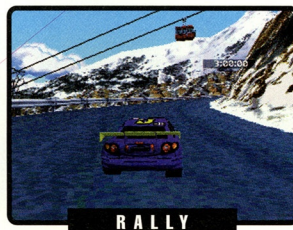
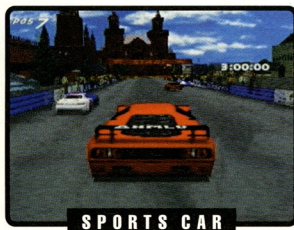
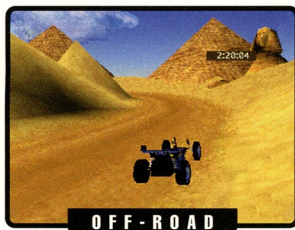
The Saturn version of *Last Bronx* is on track for being a close match to the arcade version. Attempting to recapture the high-resolution look of *Virtua Fighter 2* on Saturn, the game will not go the route of *Fighting Vipers* and *Fighters Megamix* with heavy reliance on Gouraud shading and multiple lighting effects. The home version of the game will also feature an additional CD with a sophisticated tutorial and other bonus items such as various skill levels of the original arcade game and possibly character art.

In all, *Last Bronx* represents a different kind of fighting game for Saturn and reflects AM3's refusal to take a back seat to AM2 or any other R & D department.





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Akuji: The Heartless

Crystal Dynamics recycles Gex's 3D engine but leaves the humor behind with this tribal quest in the spirit of *Legacy of Kain*



Note the artwork on Akuji's back (left), which makes him one of the first tattooed game heroes

Cystal's character-driven *Legacy of Kain* swept players up in a vampire's vengeful quest, enabling them to restore their anti-hero's health by preying upon innocents. The developer has recently assembled a new team and is preparing what could be the equivalent of "*Kain* gone 3D," using the same engine that's powering the 3D Gex sequel (NG 31).

While both *Kain* and *Akuji* present vengeance-based backstories, *Akuji*'s setting and storyline are far from the medieval realm of the vampire *Kain*. *Akuji* is a member of an enslaved tribe, living in a barbaric, voodoo-laden jungle. When his heart is ripped out by a demonlord on his wedding day, *Akuji* manages to survive through the transplant of a magic stone. Thus begins his quest for vengeance.

For *Akuji*, Crystal is seriously modifying the Gex engine, swapping the chummy platform-hopping for more combat and puzzle-based gameplay. *Akuji* can climb, crawl, swing, and use numerous magical and physical attacks, such as dropping on enemies from above. According to Crystal, the "feeding

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	TBA
Developer:	Crystal Dynamics
Release Date:	March 1998
Origin:	U.S.

mechanic" that was so popular in *Kain* has been brought back. In order to maintain health, *Akuji* must draw the life force out of his opponents in the same way *Kain* required blood. Also, *Akuji* gains more magic and weapons, including power-up masks, as he progresses.

It's still very early in development, so it's impossible to gauge if *Akuji* will be as expansive as *Kain* was, especially considering that 3D environments monopolize more disc space than static 2D backgrounds. But those with an appetite for destruction should hope *Akuji*'s in for the long haul.



The phrase "stranger in a strange land" aptly describes this game



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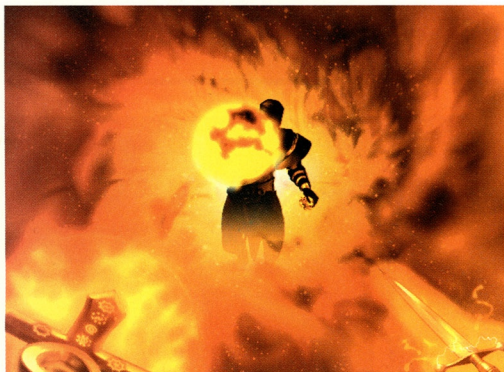


Much of *Akuji*'s tribal look can be seen in these early design sketches

ng alphas



Cryo



Dreams, Cryo's entry in the 3D action-adventure category, looks good

It's been said before, but it bears repeating: French game developers have style to burn. Cryo — who broke on the scene in '92 with *Dune*, followed by the *Dragon Lore* series, *Mega Race*, *Lost Eden*, and more recently, *Atlantis* and the historical adventure *Versailles* — is no exception. Indeed, *Versailles*, produced in cooperation with Beatrix Saule, chief curator of the Museum of the Chateau of Versailles, re-creates the famed palace as it was during the reign of Louis XIV, a painstaking and historically accurate process that took over two years.

All of this French style, however, is sometimes lost under the crushing weight of mediocre gameplay, a stereotype the designers at Cryo are painfully aware of. Its latest line of products, slated for distribution in the U.S. through Interplay, is aimed at expanding the company's range beyond the graphic adventures it has become known for, while still playing to the company's strength: graphic detail and excellence.

Dreams, a real-time 3D action game, set in the land of, well, dreams, is a good example. While the game certainly looks excellent, using an odd mix of surreal styles, producer and designer Olivier Denes explains, "We don't want just pretty graphics. We want a game, first and foremost." From a third-person

A stylish developer known mostly for its graphic adventures is branching out with a new batch of titles

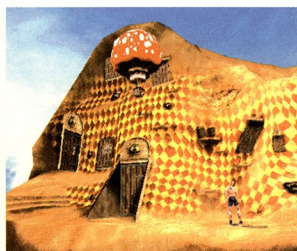
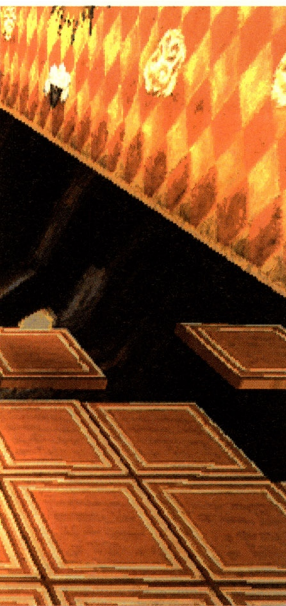


perspective, players travel through the game's 100 areas, gather magic powers and weapons, and find friends. Solutions to the game's various challenges are remarkably open-ended.

Enemies can be defeated through firepower, non-lethal magic, or even simply avoided in some cases. Denes continues, "The team is all gamers, but we're all different gamers, so in *Dreams*, you can do as you wish. I watched a woman play and she said, "How wonderful, you can fly." A man usually likes to pick a gun and shoot everything. We try to let people do things the way they like." Set for release in Europe in October, with a U.S. release through Interplay sometime shortly after, *Dreams* will be available for PC and PlayStation.



Third Millennium's resource management is leavened with cut scenes

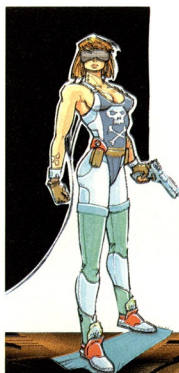


The surreal world of *Dreams* is as open-ended as a player's imagination. Players can fly, cast spells, fight, or simply avoid obstacles as they wish



Third Millennium is a highly complex PC CD-ROM resource management game, in which the player takes control of his or her little corner of the world in the year 2000, with the eventual goal of running the whole planet by the year 2500. The approach and execution is extremely reminiscent of *Balance of Power*, but the level of game detail is astounding.

Players have to worry about the usual things like keeping a healthy economy going, and must also play politics with various interest groups (divided into left, right, and centrist plus religious and non-religious — for a total of six permutations) and make deals and reach compromises on 300 different subjects, covering everything from retirement age, to ecological protection,



UBIK uses real-time 3D characters in a prerendered background, but players can still choose different camera angles

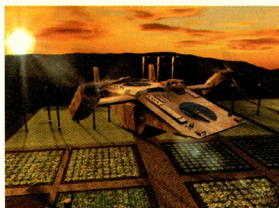
to abortion. Interestingly, although there is a military component, and military power is one area that affects negotiations, there is no combat. Producer Stephan Ressot sums up why: "You can't win other continents with your army. I don't think that's realistic now. You can do it through negotiation, economic means, and so on, but you can't do it through warfare because you simply can't do that in the real world anymore — at least I hope not!"

UBIK, based on the novel by Phillip K. Dick, is best described by co-designer Jean-Luc Sale. "It's a hybrid between RPG, real-time strategy, action,

All this French style, however, can be lost under mediocre gameplay

and a little bit of adventure, because you can talk to other characters — it's the game with everything." Set in the future, when the world is run by corporations and information is power, *UBIK* lets players assemble a five-person team of commandos with various physical and psychic skills through a series of 15 missions. Goals range from killing everyone in the place to rescuing hostages and stealing corporate secrets.

ng alphas



The company still relies on its strength however — intense graphic detail

The game combines prerendered backgrounds with real-time 3D characters in the style of *Resident Evil* but also gives players a choice of different perspectives in each scene, as each has been rendered from several different views.

Versions are in the works for both PC and PlayStation, and the PlayStation version even boasts a pixel-accurate z-

usual groans that accompany such an announcement are staved off by a few intriguing new approaches.

Riverworld is real-time strategy, but with interesting new features

buffering routine, provided by Alan Jardine of U.K. developer Smart Dog. "It's tough to do, because normally on PlayStation you have to clip to a polygon," says Jardine. "This is our own proprietary technique. They said you couldn't do this on PlayStation, but we did it."

Riverworld, based on the novels by Phillip Jose Farmer, is Cryo's entry in the real-time strategy genre. However, the

First, the game is in real time, but also presented in full 3D, which allows viewing from either the traditional overhead map or from a third-person, over-the-shoulder perspective. Second, the premise of the novels — everyone on Earth who ever lived is resurrected on a new planet, along the banks of a river that covers the entire globe, and death merely leads to being reborn at another place on the river — adds a touch of RPG element to the game, as the player attempts to recruit various historical figures. "In *Warcraft* or *Command & Conquer*," explains Laurent



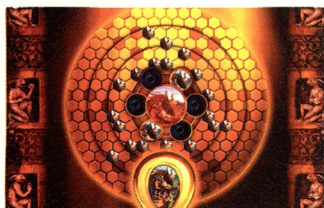
Dreams uses low-polygon count models in its cut scenes

Jourdain, co-designer, "one man isn't that important — you have money, you make more. Here, when someone dies, they're reborn somewhere else on the river, which means you can lose them to someone else."

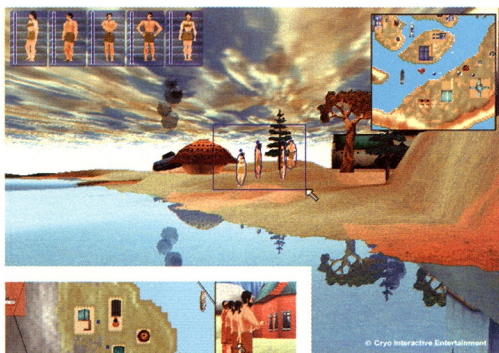
The game is being written completely in Pentium assembly for maximum speed — Jourdain describes his co-designer and lead programmer, Fabrice Bernard as, "the Superman of assembly" — and the final game will be networkable for at least four, and perhaps as many as eight, players.

The last project in development at Cryo — at least of those anyone there is currently willing to discuss — is *Intervention*. Perhaps the ultimate expression of the "god game" genre, this turn-based strategy game actually gives

the player the persona of a god. The object is to choose what kind of god you wish to be (governing things like life, death, war, love, and industry, the choice affecting what kind of powers one can gain), and then to create a race of beings, help them prosper, and earn their adoration. The more believers a god can accumulate, the more powerful he or she can become, eventually gaining the ability to reach out to other worlds and other universes.



Intervention makes the player a god — albeit a god vying for supremacy with up to seven other gods over the Internet



Riverworld can be played from either an overhead map or from a 3D, third-person perspective

Other, rival gods will naturally attempt to undermine the player's efforts. Although the game can be played against the computer's AI, it is intended as a multiplayer contest over the Internet, with up to eight divine players competing at once — that's where the game gets interesting. Similar to Blizzard's *Battle.net*, Cryo's server acts as a hub, matching players for ongoing contests with no set time limit — games can take hours or months, and the title's turn-based structure makes the setup ideal.

Remi Herbulot, one of Cryo's co-founders, points to *Intervention* with pride. "A lot of people have said, 'Yes, Cryo does nice graphics, but the games aren't that good,' " he says. "This is our answer. It's pure gameplay. The people we have working on it are so deeply into the genre, they come to a meeting and try to explain how all this works together, and no one understands what they're talking about." He holds his fingers about three inches apart and smiles, "The design document was this thick — like a phone book!"

That the designers at Cryo are expanding into new areas, keeping the gameplay at the fore, yet not sacrificing any of the visual and graphic creativity they're known for, makes it a company to root for. Indeed, if any design house has a chance to avoid the French stereotype of style over substance, Cryo is it.

ng alphas

Cardinal Syn

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	SCEA
Developer:	Kronos
Release Date:	Early 1998
Origin:	U.S.

From its rushed-out and poorly received *Criticom* to its just-above-average *Dark Rift* for Nintendo 64, Kronos has a fairly sordid history with fighting games. But with *Cardinal Syn*, the developer may have sorted it all out.

Syn could be considered America's answer to *Bushido Blade*, swapping out samurai swords for medieval weapons and magic. Like Square's hit sword-slashing sensation, *Syn* features expansive 3D environments and puts players in control of a well-detailed polygonal fighter.

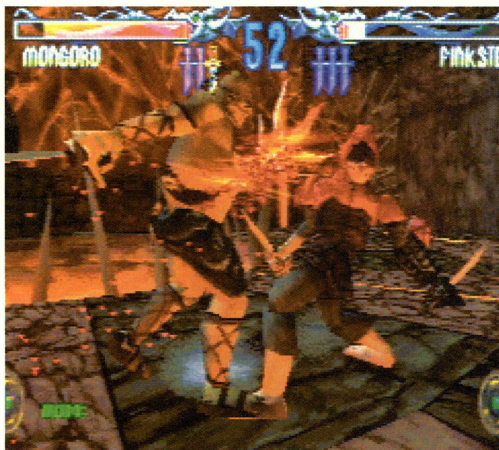


However, *Syn* is a more traditional fighting game, with a standard damage meter and combo-attacks that let you dismember opponents at the end of a match. There are eight selectable characters, plus a mid-boss, an end-boss, and alternate "evil twin" characters. Much like *Mace: The Dark Age*, the game spills copious quantities of blood. It also features the transparent



These early screenshots depict well-armed characters whose weapons and motion-captured moves resemble those of *Soul Blade*

Kronos and SCEA reveal another weapons-based fighting game in the works for PS-X



This arena's protruding spikes (above) add danger beyond that of an opponent



weapon-trail effects first seen in *Soul Blade* — and since implemented in every subsequent weapon-based fighting game.

While *Syn* enables players to move anywhere within a large 3D environment, it ups *Bushido Blade*'s ante with much more interactive backgrounds. Players are rewarded or punished for exploring, as they may find helpful pick-ups or hazardous fire pits and spiked walls. The game runs at 60 frames per second, bringing an unmatched smoothness to its motion-captured character animation.

Weapons-based brawlers and 3D exploratory fighters are already capturing some of the limelight once held solely by hand-to-hand arena fighters such as *Street Fighter*, *Virtua Fighter*, and *Tekken*; *Syn* should only accelerate the process.

After years of stagnation, games like *Syn* seem to finally be taking the fighting genre, 2D or 3D, where it needs to go — forward.

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The Odds are against you.



He's skinny. He wears a loincloth. He has no weapons.
(He's the guy that you play.)

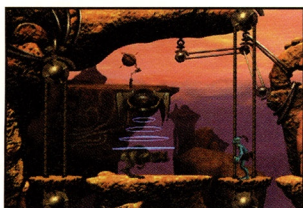


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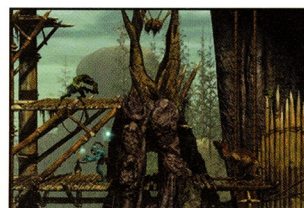
Communicate with real characters. But, not in some cardboard RPG. Blow away your enemies. But, not in some



don't get mad: get elum



between a paramite and a hard place



possession is 9/10ths of the law

Meet the Odds.



one-dimensional shooter. Solve wicked situations and wicked enemies. But, not in some wallpaper puzzle game.

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you've ever seen and blends them into one seamless, surreal, sensory overload of pure gaming. So take your loinclothed butt and claim your destiny. Savior. Or salami.

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I N O D D W E T R U S T

SEPTEMBER 1997

A.L.I.V.E.
Aware Lifeforms In
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Designed for
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ODDWORLD
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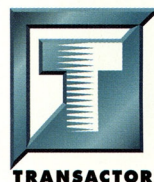


GT Interactive
Software

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Transactor

Segasoft's electronic commerce technology — displayed in *10Six*, *Vigilance*, and *Skies* — may revolutionize online game design



Recently SegaSoft unlocked the doors to Heat (**NG 30**), opening up its online service for mass-market testing. While the network of Heat continues to be put through its paces, SegaSoft, along with several developers, is already hard at work on three games that utilize a new technology — a technology which, for once, doesn't crunch more polygons or create better 3D fog, but rather empowers online game designers to create fantasy economies within their games and apply real world values to the objects therein.

Ron Martinez, president of Postlinear, simplifies it. "Transactor enables consumers, retailers, and

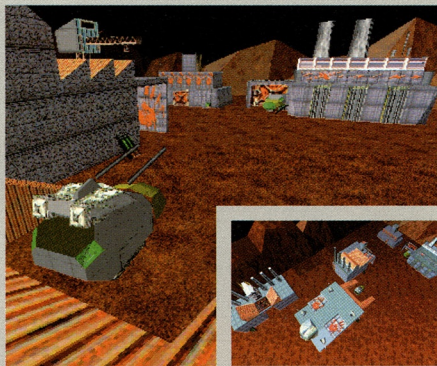
Format:	PC/Online
Publisher:	SegaSoft
Developer:	Postlinear
Release Date:	TBA
Origin:	U.S.

manufacturers to buy, sell, and prove the ownership of digital products, which exist only in the digital realm."

In an online game, these digital projects, or limited edition digital objects (ledos), are easily associated with power-ups. "Digital objects in a game environment," Martinez says, "include the games themselves, its add-ons, vehicles, weapons, and avatars."

10Six

The title says it all: ten to the sixth power, or one million. *10Six* may be the first game capable of maintaining a million players at once. The premise is to develop your own mining camp on a new planet during an intergalactic gold rush. Players must mine "Transium" and raid other bases while protecting their own camps. The game combines elements of *Doom* and *Command & Conquer*, because players raid bases from a first-person perspective and defend from an overhead perspective. As it is a persistent world 24 hours a day and seven days a week, players will depend on others to defend their bases and will need to organize raiding parties to take others'. Of course, Transactor technology will provide the economy architecture necessary for miners to evolve their camps. Developed by Postlinear, *10Six* should be the first Transactor game available on Heat this fall.



Players choose among four corporations to launch their camp. "ToyCo" (above) provides some surreal weapons

Vigilance

Embodiment much of what every hard-core gamer wants, *Vigilance* is a 3D mission-based action game in which players become members of an elite anti-terrorist team. Featuring a dynamic new engine by AnyChannel, the AnyWorld engine, the 3D environments present an astounding level of realism. The environments are created by artists with off-the-shelf 3D software, such as 3D Studio Max, and the early test levels display an unprecedented level of detail. High-definition, multiple-meshed textures and simultaneously composited light-sourcing are rendered in real time. In the one-player mode, players will unlock ledos from the CD, which they can then take onto Heat.

SegaSoft is partnering with an unannounced hardware accelerator for this title, and the engine will remain in development for another six months before true production begins. Based on an original concept by Pacey, and developed by Postlinear, *Vigilance* is due out between early to mid '98.



Even without 3D accelerator support, the AnyChannel engine creates remarkably smooth and realistic 3D environments

Postlinear plans to launch this remarkable technology with the SegaSoft titles. "It grew out of a desire to create a *Magic: The Gathering*-style scarcity economy online," says Martinez of Transactor's origin. "The principle being that there can be only one of something. You know, there is only one Excalibur. If you have it, you can use it, control it. If you want to sell it, then you can sell it, it has a resale value. It can also be taken away from you, if you decide to play for keeps."

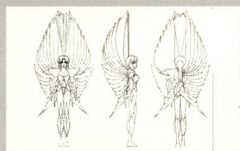
Martinez paints a scenario where a player enters a game environment with a hundred dollars worth of objects only to be plundered by an expert hit squad of loitering 13-year-olds. "You're gonna lose 100 bucks," he says, noting there will be several play models. Players can play entirely for fun, if they don't want to risk their holdings, or for ante, where only one object is at risk, or for keeps. "We think 'play for keeps' is going to be the new, most powerful kind of game

experience you can have," Martinez says with some thrust, "because things with real value are at stake at this point."

So how's it all work? When players connect to the game server via the Internet, the game server in turn relies on Transactor to access an Oracle-built database of a game's objects. Transactor then verifies ownership of the player's ledos. "If it turns out that a player doesn't really own the things he or she is bringing into a game," Martinez grins, "the game server can do whatever it wants. It can eliminate play, or it can hang a 'thief' sign around the avatar's neck."

Transactor is ultimately the backbone for orderly online gaming. Unlike other online games which have only been hacked into worthless pieces, such as *Diablo's* Battle.net, Transactor is professionally encrypted by the best in the business. Martinez identifies "crypto-gods" Bruce Schneier, author of *Applied Cryptology*, and John Kelsey of Transactor,

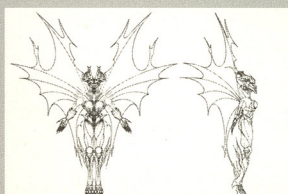
ng alphas



Unique airborne characters feature superb designs, which translate to strikingly perfected in-game polygonal models

Skies

Skies is perhaps best described as *Pilotwings 64* meets an action-RPG. Not an odd combination, considering *Skies* is the first PC game to be developed by Paradigm Entertainment, who is in fact responsible for *Pilotwings 64*. It takes place in a huge persistent world, and players soar through a mythical realm as one of many kinds of winged beings, exploring floating island terrain and battling many fantasy creatures. As a player's character gains experience, it will outwardly mature so as to graphically reflect its status. Early art and screenshots suggest a refreshing style, with a bend towards the organic and edgy fantasy character design qualities that break out of Tolkien-esque stereotypes. *Skies* will not be available until late '98.



Combat will be mostly based around projectile weapons. The dark angel (center) boasts a "chaingun crossbow"

as the system architects (who together cracked the supposedly uncrackable digital cell-phone encryption). Both are shareholders in Postlinear, and Schneider holds the title of chief scientist.

"Your crypto has to be real if people are going to risk their dollars on it," Martinez says passionately, as Transactor lets buyers and sellers select from multiple payment options, including credit cards, checks, and Heat's "Degrees" point system. "And if you can't subject it to the scrutiny of people like Bruce Schneider and John Kelsey, then you have no business taking people's money."

So who wants to pay for power-ups when they've always been free? Well according to SegaSoft's Larry Pacey, executive producer on the first three Transactor games, ledos can still be earned the old-fashioned way, by killing a

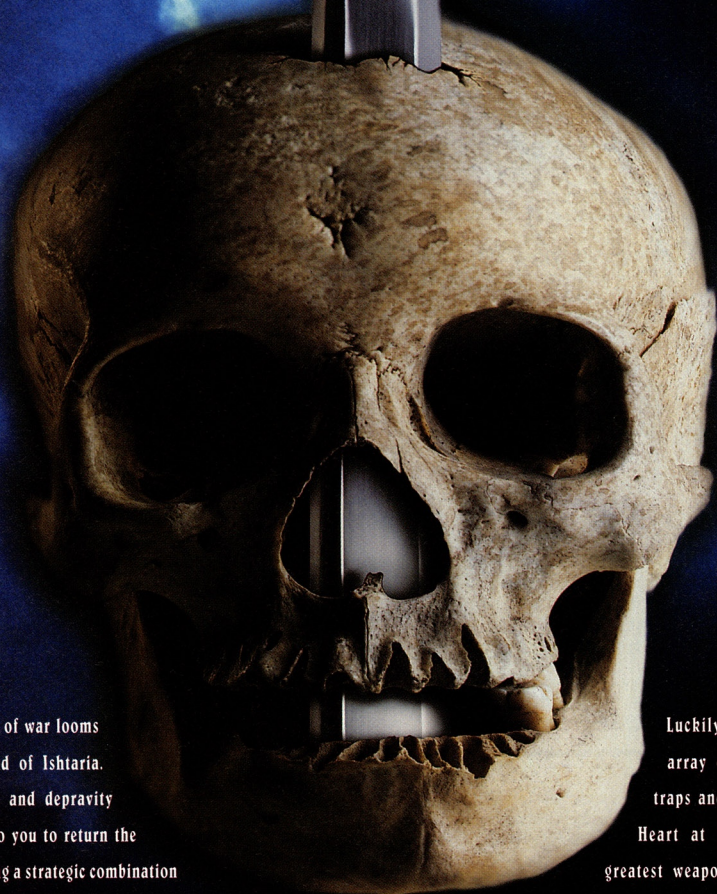
boss, completing a level, and so on. And both he and Martinez realize no one is going to buy or sell ledos inside a sub-standard game. "The games are everything," Martinez emphasizes. "If you don't have a cool game, you don't have the kind of appeal in the objects themselves." And an early look at Pacey's titles suggests they have the draw.

This bartering seems strangely far-off to gamers outside the online realm, but it's happening now; Postlinear's technology is in place, patents are pending, and millions are being spent developing games around this architecture. Pacey says he can't consider designing a game without Transactor. "Your game is going to get exponentially deeper," Pacey says and with grand vision explains how he hopes some gamer will someday pay for college by selling ledos for one of his games. Stranger things have happened.

ng



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VANDAL-HEARTS

ng alphas



Zork: Grand Inquisitor

For Zork's 20th anniversary, Activision puts the classic series back on track

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Activision
Developer:	Activision
Release Date:	Fall 1997
Origin:	U.S.

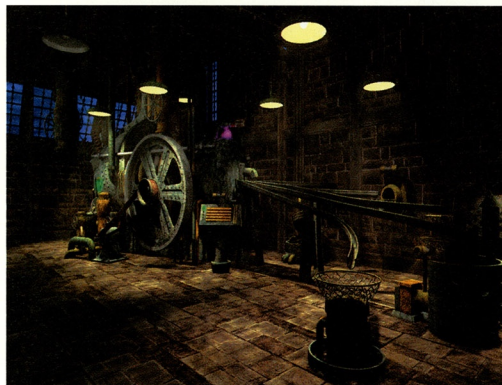
Despite its many technological achievements (360° Z-vision viewing, for one), *Zork: Nemesis* was ultimately a very unsatisfying experience. Its dark plot and illogical *Myst*-like puzzles were as far from the impressive legacy of *Zork* as possible. Activision seems to have recognized the shortcomings of the game, and even at an early stage, *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*, the eighth installment in the series (11th if you count the *Enchanter* series) far exceeds it in terms of plot, writing, and puzzle design.

"One of the problems with *Nemesis*," says Laird Malamed, executive producer (and technical director on *Nemesis*) "was that we were time constrained — when we got done with the engine, we didn't really have

Gone is the dark, romance novel plot of *Zork: Nemesis*

time to put in anything much more complicated than simple 'control panel' puzzles." This time, however, he continues, "we're using the same basic engine — with plenty of modifications and upgrades, of course — but it's given us more time to concentrate on the puzzles." Of the 50+ puzzles in the game, Malamed estimates that fewer than 10 are what Infocom alumnus Bob Bates of *Legend* calls "interface puzzles" — the kind of "manipulate-the-slider" puzzles that occur in a format outside the standard game interface.

Instead, most of the puzzles are (thankfully) of the inventory, building, and spell-casting variety. In short, they are part of (and move ahead) the plot instead of being separate from (and having little to do with) the story. The game was actually done in rough form in Inform (a text adventure creation language) before

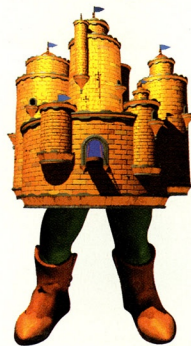


The high-res art enables a new view of the GUE. This is an execution chamber, where magic practitioners are compressed to token size

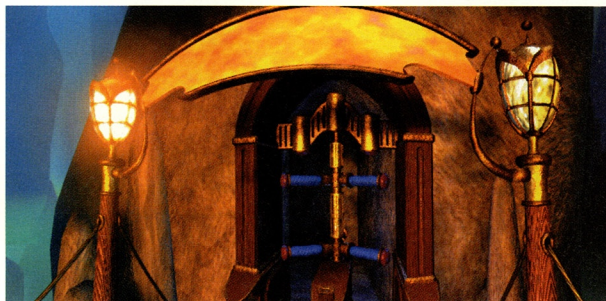
work started on the graphics, so Malamed is confident that it will please even the most serious adventure game fans. "Is it a text adventure? No. But it does have some of the best qualities that text adventures offer," he claims.

The story is also more in line with the original *Zork*. Gone is the dark, romance novel plot of *Nemesis* (nice story, but for a *Zork* game?), and in its place is a storyline and style that harkens back to the *Zork* games of old.

The game is set a century after *Beyond Zork*; magic has been outlawed.



Typical of the humor is a subway that never slows down





You play an adventurer who's run afoul of the Magic Inquisition, and come into the possession of a lantern containing the wise-cracking spirit of the Dungeon Master. After making a hasty exit to the Great Underground Empire, the player needs to complete several quests to vanquish the Inquisitor. Along the way, loose ends from the *Zorks* (graphical and text) as well as the *Enchanter* series will



A Z-Vision view (top) of the Hades subway stop. The Great Underground Empire gets its humor back in *Inquisitor*

Few games have more history: Zork's 20th anniversary was June 12th, 1997


be tied together. One of the items needed to complete the game, for instance, is the Coconut of Quendor.

The dungeon master is more than a plot device. Not only does he provide much of the humor in the game, but by replying to any action you do, even actions for which there is no graphical response, his voice helps convey the feeling of depth and "ability to try anything" that made the text games so deep.

One of the biggest challenges when doing a game with as much history as *Zork* (and few series have more history — the game's 20th anniversary was June 12th, 1997) is figuring out how much to pander to fans of the series. Malamed thinks the designers have struck a good

balance: "If you've played the original *Zorks*, there will be plenty of references there. If not, you won't really be at a loss."

Perhaps most exciting to old-school Infocom fans, though, is that Marc Blank (co-designer, with Dave Lebling of the original *Zork*) has been commissioned to do an original text adventure (written in Inform) that will come with the game. The adventure, *Zork: Undiscovered Underground*, is set just before *Inquisitor*, and should provide an opportunity for newcomers to the series to learn what all the fuss is about. See our interview with Marc on page 74.

The inclusion of a new, Activision-sanctioned text adventure in the *Zork* universe alone should convince gamers how serious Activision is (this time, at least) to do *Zork* right. And it looks like they may have finally done it. The technology is already there. If the writing and puzzle quality live up to Activision's claims (and expectations), this could be one of the best adventures — graphical or text — since *Zork 0*. 



The panoramic view (left) enabled by Z-Vision is nothing short of stunning



An interview with

Marc Blank

Marc Blank, one of the original "implementors" at Infocom, co-designed the text *Zork* series with Dave Lebling. His development studio Eidetic (started with sci-fi author and fellow Infocom alumnus Mike Berlyn) is currently working on *Legend for SISA*. **Next Generation** spoke to him about his new Infocom text adventure, *Undiscovered Underground*, the first to be released by Activision since 1988. The game will accompany *Inquisitor* and is set just before it.

NG: Have you played the graphical *Zorks*? Do you feel they were true to the games you made at Infocom?

Marc Blank: I played *Return to Zork* for a while, and I played *Nemesis* some. I thought that technologically they were outstanding. I think they did a lot of nice things, and I think the technology was very good. What was disappointing to me in both of them — and this is a personal thing to me — was that the stories and the writing, even to the extent that it is visualized or spoken, were not very *Zork*-ish. And that's okay, because they own the name and they can do whatever they want with it. But you know, to me, the *Zork* universe was kind of absurd and silly in a sophisticated way. It's just humorous, as opposed to technologically marvelous, and I think that some of that was lost in the gap. From what I've read in the early design documents of the new game, *Grand Inquisitor*, the intention is to go much much more back to the roots of *Zork* and try to recreate a lot of that.

Personally to me, that's kind of nice. That's why I was interested in doing something for them. I think that for people who played the old games, it'll be fun to again get a taste for what the old games were like and be reminded of the charm of the text games. For people who haven't seen the original *Zork*, we can give them a taste of what was fun about text adventures, in a way that's easy enough to get into but not long enough that they have to play a whole game. So I think in lots of ways it's a good fit with *Inquisitor*.

NG: What are you trying to accomplish with *Undiscovered Underground*?

Marc: The intention was to give the flavor of the old *Zorks*, some of the puzzles — some of



I think *Underground* very much captures the style of the old games

which are pretty hard, by the way. I think for someone who is very sophisticated, it will take maybe a few hours to complete, but to someone who isn't it could be a bunch more. It's about half the size of *Zork I*, and I think the puzzles are more interesting and are certainly written much better! We have learned something over the years. [Smiles] But I think it very much captures the style of the old games — from the almost abusive parser to the general silliness. Some of the puzzles are satirical. I think they're all in good fun.

NG: What reaction are you hoping to get from the game?

Marc: The reaction I want to get from the people who play it? I want them to feel that a piece of the old *Zork* universe had been rediscovered after many years, as opposed to something that just has the name "*Zork*."

And the idea is that you as the adventurer are exploring an area that was just unearthed. It's just a different piece of the GUE, more or less as it had been left in terms of style, tone, and references. It certainly requires no prior knowledge [of the *Zork* universe], although I think that the people who have played the prior games will get a lot more out of the references. It's designed so that the people who haven't played them won't miss anything but there'll be an extra smile from the people who say, "Oh, oh, oh, I see what that's referring to."

But the goal isn't to make it something that requires knowledge — it's not even necessary. It's just as in many films there are references to other films, whether inspiration or things the

director or writer had done, and those are fun if you get them but no harm if you don't — you're not penalized for them. That's the tone, and I'm really curious to see the reaction to this. Obviously, text *Zorks* haven't been done in a long time, and mainly I hope that people enjoy it.

NG: What's the story behind *Undiscovered Underground*?

Marc: It doesn't really have a plot. None of the *Zorks* had a plot. They had a goal. And I think if my goal were to do an entire game — I mean a big game — it's important that narrative elements tie the game together. But I think there's no way you could do justice to any kind of

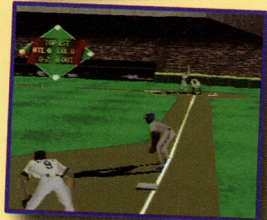
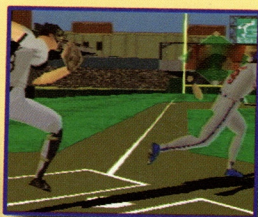
story in an environment with ten or 15 rooms. The goal is to recreate the old *Zorks*; the old *Zorks* were pretty story-less — they were treasure hunts. There's nothing wrong with having a heavy story, but part of the charm with the old games was that they didn't need heavy story to work.

NG: How important do you feel story is to adventure games? Certainly many adventures produced today (text and graphical) focus on story as an element as important as puzzles.

Marc: I think at some point, as Infocom went on and on, starting to talk about interactive fiction, I think some sight was lost of the fact that these things are just supposed to be fun.

At the end of the day, there can be a story, but what you don't want to do is make the story so heavy-handed or so overwrought, or try so hard to emulate high-brow literature, that you lose track of the reality that people are doing this to have their minds engaged, to laugh now and then, and to think. But this is not somehow intended to replace fiction or to be a great art. I think it's supposed to be a great game, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

The fact that *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.*, or any of the huge classics will stay around forever — the fact that they aren't always brilliant film-making, or the fact that philosophers will not discuss them — I don't think that's interesting. What's important is that people will enjoy the game and have a good time and when they remember it, they say, "Oh yeah, that was a great time, that was fun, I liked that."



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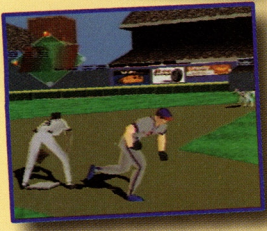
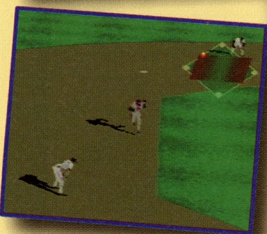
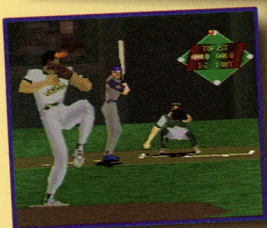
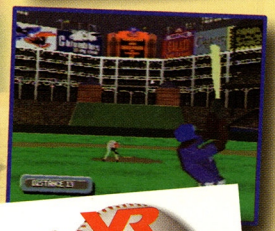
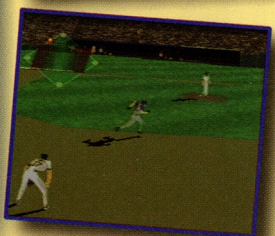
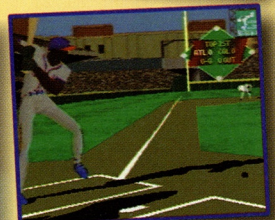
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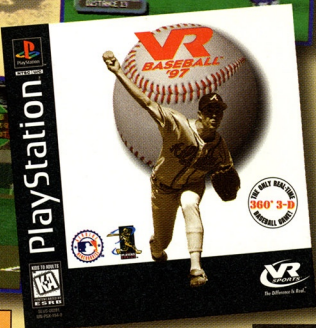
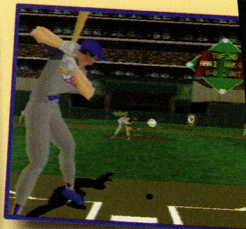


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Redline



What happens when you mix *Twisted Metal*, *Interstate '76*, and *Doom*? Accolade knows



The stunning graphics enable the cars' style to come through. From L.A. low-riders to *Road Warrior* battle-wagons, this is gang war in style

Combining successful game concepts doesn't always work out as planned; just look at *Shadows of the Empire*. But Accolade appears to have avoided the miscues of LucasArts with its latest offering, *Redline*.

There are a dozen vehicles to choose from — including a van, a transit bus, and a Humvee. All can be customized, *Interstate '76*-style; external views show the customization. The vehicles look great, but the graphics come with a price; the PC version will require a 3Dfx card (D3D support is TBD).

Much of the game is executed in a claustrophobic *Twisted Metal* pastiche, in which the player competes in automotive

Format:	PC, PlayStation
Publisher:	Accolade
Developer:	Accolade
Release Date:	November 1997 (PC), TBA (PS-X)
Origin:	U.S.

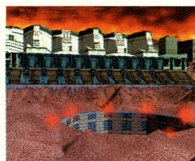
shootouts with other gang members in arenas of varying size and terrain. These battles advance the player's status in his or her gang, which enables the main character (supposedly) to escape the hellish, fallout-laden world and move in with the rich.

The rest of the game takes place in huge, detailed missions à la *I-76*. This is where *Redline* breaks new ground: the majority of these missions require the player to get out of his or her car at some point. This leads to first person, *Doom*-style sequences.

The PC and PlayStation versions of *Redline* will be quite different — notably, the PlayStation version will, like *Mechwarrior 2*, be more action-intensive.

If Accolade can balance the disparate gameplay styles, the game has a real shot at duplicating not only the mechanics, but also the sales figures of the titles it draws upon so heavily for inspiration.

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Redline's vehicles look gorgeous, but the graphics will cost you. The PC version of the game only runs with a 3Dfx card

CLOCK TOWER



Mad Dog McGamer

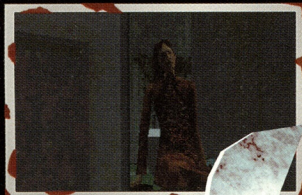
door to half eaten bodies in the restroom. ASCII Entertainment™, Inc. has packed Clock Tower™ to the belfry with some of the most gruesome and spectacular graphics of the year! Watch in horror as the limping gait of the

CRIMSON FOUNTAINS OF GORE

A bright plume of warm crimson rain erupted as the giant scissors rent the flesh of his next victim... This is certainly not the game for the timid or weak of stomach! From corpses at your bedroom

immortal Scissorman approaches your present hiding place — only to see the bright fountain of your own blood if he happens to find you! Any horror fan will quickly recognize the brilliance of the programmer's virtuoso performance in the lighting, shadowing, angles, and sheer volume of gruesome content! Lots of animation and full 3-D polygons were used to bring the bloody, murderous surroundings to life. This, in conjunction with the well detailed backgrounds and characters, will have you at the edge of your seat — praying that you make it through the night!

ASCII
ENTERTAINMENT



THE HORROR OF SILENCE

The chilling sound of the Banshee's scream itself couldn't have been more dreadful than the sound of the sheering scrape of sharpened steel blades sliding past each other — not to mention the wonderful effect of pure silence in some of the most chillingly tense scenes of the game.

There's something terribly dreadful in the sound of your own two feet echoing through some of the most profoundly evil halls ever wrought, and I couldn't agree more with the programmers when they spoke of the "Terror of Sound" which they labored for in this game!

ASCII Entertainment's purpose in the sound scheme of this game is fairly easy to understand... with sounds that aren't there when they should be, sounds in impossible places, the chilling music of the chase, and the haunting scrape of the Scissorman himself as he stalks you with inhuman determination... they want to scare you out of your skin! Of course, the voice-overs and sound effects of the surrounding environments are a beautiful addition to the already impressive audio display. The tightly knit union of background noise, voices, sound of movement, music, and silence create a living auditory atmosphere that will draw you into the world of terror on the screen right before you.

Terror gripped the hearts of the mixed party of ten as they finally reached the unholy walls of the Barrow's family mansion in England. No one could have imagined the unspeakable horrors that lay behind the infamous Scissorman case when the malevolent butchering had begun. Now, the dreadful search for the answers had culminated into a lynching party that brought them all here, to the very doorstep of hell itself. Would they finally find the key to send this twisted soul back to the nether regions of death that had so maliciously spat him into their lives? ...only TIME will tell.

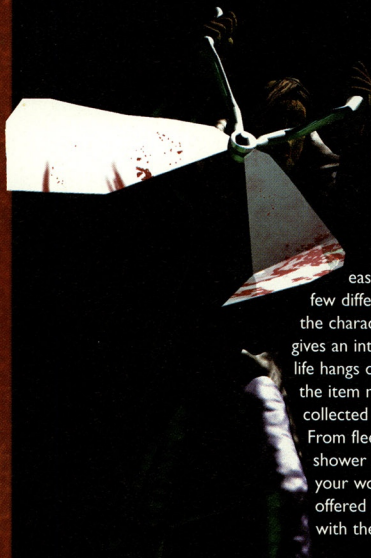
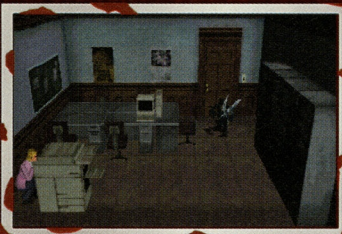
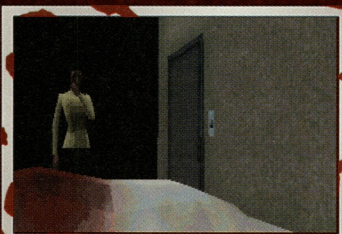


A TIME TO KILL

A series of brutal murders have signaled the return of one of the most terrifying killers in the history of Romsdaalen, Norway — Scissorman! Clock Tower starts out with an introduction of the supposed demise of the Scissorman ten years ago and then enters into the player controlled prologue where we are introduced to the characters. The new aspects of "the old monster in a spooky place" are added to by the inclusion of several implements of actual horror stories — including, interlude daytime scenes of detective work between nights of cold, brutal killing, as well as the full possibility of a story ending abruptly or in any number of ways! The possibility of up to ten different endings is definitely an aspect that will allow for great replay value!

With heightened graphics, sound, control, and storyline as the main areas of concentration, it is apparent that ASCII Entertainment had the player foremost in mind when developing this game.





RUN FOR YOUR LIFE...

In a game where one false move could easily mean the difference between escape and grizzly death, control is of paramount importance. This is another area where Clock Tower excels!

The ease with which the player can move about the screens and interact with objects (in a myriad of different ways) is easily accomplished with the use of surprisingly few different types of on-screen indicators. Each tell the character what types of actions are possible. This gives an intuitive control that is necessary when your life hangs on a split second decision. Additionally, using the item menu for accessing the items which you've collected is only a button press away!

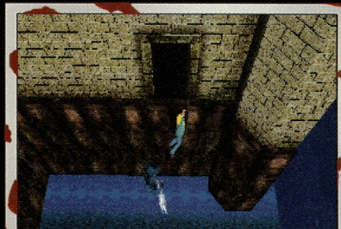
From fleeing down dark corridors and hiding in shower stalls, to hurling chairs and brawling with your would be assailant, the full range of movements offered by Clock Tower will leave you breathless with the fight or flight instinct as you navigate the beautifully wrought 3-D environment.

Very seldom does a game come out that achieves true excellence in every area of gameplay. With stunning visual effects, outstanding depth of characters and storyline, precision control, perfection of the "Terror of Sound," as well as the replay value of ten endings, ASCII Entertainment must be congratulated for a work of art. Clock Tower is a masterpiece of Horror!



SPECIAL FEATURES!

In addition to the normal features of present day video games, like being able to save and load games, ASCII Entertainment has also included several "Special Features." As you will quickly notice when playing the game, you'll have the opportunity to play as four different characters. You can end the game with all four characters, and each one has several different endings depending on how well you do in the game. Once you've seen an ending, you can check on the special menu "Ending List" to see whether you got an A, B, C, D, or E ending. You can review the ending cinematic by selecting one of the endings you have completed (There is no cinematic for the D endings). In this way, you'll know when you've completed all ten endings. — Once you've completed an "A" ending, you can go to the "???" in the pamphlet menu option for a secret EXTRA MODE menu! Also, when you've completed all ten endings, you have the power to go back and start the game over — There will be another new option called BUYOBUBYO. (I won't give away what this does, but believe me, it's cool!)



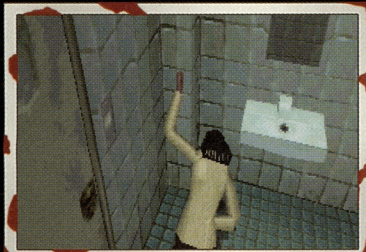
TIPS ON STAYING ALIVE...

As you may have noticed, you can't actually expect to solve the case of the Scissorman if you're kicking up daisies with a large scissor hole in your chest. If you find this alarming, you may find that the following information may help you to get in a few good licks before spilling your guts at Scissorman's feet. Scope out a room before you're in danger. If there seems to be a large something that you could run around (like a table or a couch), it could buy you some time to think when Scissorman chase's you around and around. Also, look for items that you could possibly throw at Scissorman. There is one room with a chair that you can throw at him, in another room, there's a bike, and in yet another room, you can find a mop to hurl at your attacker. There are several items in each scenario that can be used to slow down the Scissorman, but be cautious with the items you throw, you can only throw them at him once. Also, try to avoid hiding in the same place too many times in a row. Scissorman has a limited IQ, but he's not that stupid! As a last resort, you can use the panic button to engage Scissorman in hand to hand combat. If you press the panic button fast enough, you live, if not, you're history! Be aware that you can only use this method a couple of times before your status arrow goes red — then you'll have to try running away instead of fighting...at least until your status goes back to yellow or white. Also remember to check every nook and cranny for items that you may be able to use later. With a little help, you might just live to see tomorrow.

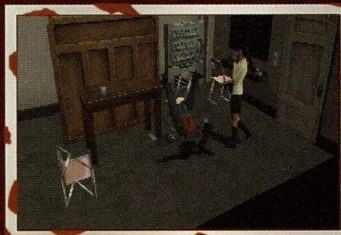


DEATH OF A TIRED GENRE

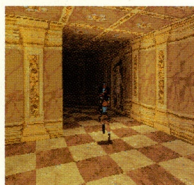
With one of the first true horror stories to come to the PlayStation™ game console, ASCII Entertainment is staying at the forefront of ground breaking technology and new genre ideas with this latest game. This isn't just another of the tired "battle against the typical bad guy," formula game where you go into a scary house, look around, kick butt, and leave. Clock Tower brings a totally new villain concept to the screen. Scissorman appears in a mystical and beautiful land seldom thought of when conceiving a new game (Romsdaalen, Norway), and when he gets there, all hell breaks loose — it's your job to clean it all up and try to put a stop to it. The beauty is that the random appearance of the villain makes the game totally unpredictable from start to finish, giving a tired old preconception of games (that a character should be at a certain place at a certain time) a new life in what's sure to be a new genre of true horror games for the PlayStation game console. Enjoy!



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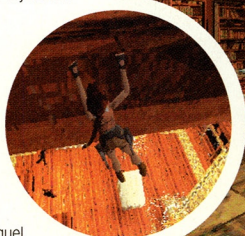
Tomb Raider 2



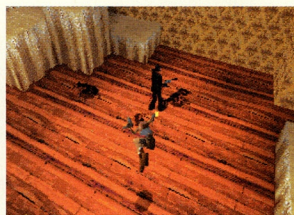
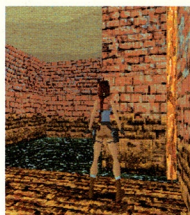
The exploration elements are still a prominent part of the gameplay

When the original *Tomb Raider* surfaced on PlayStation, gamers all over the world were treated to an ambitious, stylish, and inventive new adventure game that really stretched the limits of the hardware technology. Or so we thought. With a year's worth of tweaking and refining of the game engine, the team at Core is ready to release an even more impressive example of what PlayStation can do with *Tomb Raider 2*. What's far more important than the technological advancements, however, is how the gameplay experience has been enhanced and what new experiences fans of the original can expect from the sequel.

To create a satisfying sequel, the team at Core set out to incorporate all the good suggestions they heard. The lion's share of these suggestions were related to additional actions for Lara. In the original, her actions were limited to walking, running, jumping, swimming, and

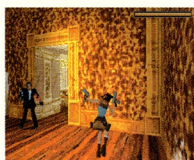
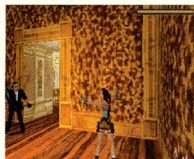


Lara Croft returns in one of the most highly anticipated sequels of the 32-bit age. With a long list of refinements this time around, it should be even more exciting than the first



The environments and enemies found in *Tomb Raider 2* are far more varied than those that appeared in the original

Format:	PlayStation, PC
Publisher:	Eidos
Developer:	Core
Release Date:	Fall 1997
Origin:	Europe



Human enemies play a much more important role this time around

hanging. In *Tomb Raider 2* she will be able to do all of these things and also crawl (which will give her access to small passageways), shoot a spear-gun underwater, and actually climb up and down the walls using vines.

The focus on human enemies is also new. There were a few humans to battle against in the original; most of the fighting was done against wild animals and mythological creatures. *Tomb Raider 2* will feature a considerably larger number of human enemies. What this means is that the enemies will generally be more intelligent than those in the original. Human enemies have been designed to use their environments to

their advantage, and fighting against them will not be as easy as just aiming and shooting. The human enemies also add to the complexity of the storyline in a way that bears and crocodiles cannot. For fans of the animal enemies in the original, however, fear not: there are still plenty of wild creatures to battle in *Tomb Raider 2*.

Probably the biggest difference in *Tomb Raider 2* is that much of the game takes place in exterior settings. With locations ranging from Tibet to Italy, the new exterior levels let Lara explore in new ways. Another promising level involves underwater exploration of a sunken ship. In all, *Tomb Raider 2* is set to do everything the original did but with a touch more maturity.

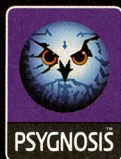
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Pac-Man: Ghost Zone



Will the most legendary 2D character of all time make a startling 3D debut?



Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Namco
Developer:	Namco US
Release Date:	Fall 1997
Origin:	U.S.

Bill (Cool Spot for Genesis) Anderson always wondered how the ghosts in the original *Pac-Man* came to be inside that box in the center of the maze. So when the veteran game designer and current Namco project manager joined its U.S. internal team, he created an answer for himself in *Pac-Man: Ghost Zone*. In the first project to be published from this group, Anderson and his team bring the yellow fellow back in this 3D adventure.

"We wanted to break away from all the *Pac-Man* titles that came before it," says Anderson, "because they were sort of — marginal. So we went back to the beginning and started with the original arcade machine."

And start with the arcade machine they did. In a *Tron*-like plotline, the player has been sucked inside a *Pac-Man* machine by the "Ghostlord" and turned

Namco isn't shying away from massive indoor and outdoor levels, with environments subtly reflecting the innards of an arcade machine

into *Pac-Man*. In the course of 14 worlds (each with several sub-locations), the player must free the real *Pac-Man* and put an end to the robotic Ghostlord, who plans to spread his horror into the real world. With this in mind, many of the environments and *Pac-Man*'s enemies are inspired by, and consist of pieces from, coin-op cabinet innards.

Ghost Zone is very much a contemporary 3D game. *Pac-Man* can do almost all of the things Mario can — swim, fly, punch — and some other things Mario can't, such as shoot, chomp, and ice-skate. But considering the



Enemies are rendered before their polygonal models are made



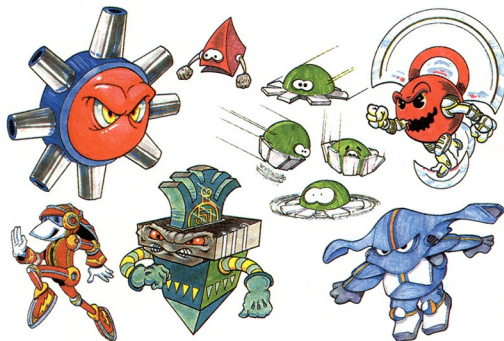
Bottomless chasms are among the many environmental dangers

character and storyline, the team wanted to add subtle *Pac-Man* nostalgia, without beating the player over the head with it. "What we really wanted to do," says project coordinator Brian Schorr, "is meld all the classic elements from the first game into the new one, without it being hacked. We wanted to do it cleanly and make it logical."

In this vein, the team has balanced modern gameplay mechanics with old-school dot-munching and ghost-eating. Also, the current sound effects are very reminiscent of the original game, including a big band version of the original opening theme music, scored by Tommy Tallarico, who is providing all of the sound.

One of the biggest challenges was an external one. According to Anderson and director of marketing Mike Fisher, securing the *Pac-Man* license for the U.S. internal studio wasn't easy. The team had to follow strict licensing guidelines set by Japan's Namco Limited. "There'd never been a licensed model for a 3D image of Pac-Man," Anderson says proudly. "There are tons of 2D licenses in print, but we wanted to do things with the model that brought his personality out, like Mario, and the 2D images just didn't cut it. We had to put our model before Namco Limited's staunchest critics, and the 3D model we have now is the official 3D model for the style guide."

And Namco US is making sure the whole game lives up to a very high art standard, as 11 members of the 18-person



These sketches reflect the originality Namco wanted for the enemy characters very early on, including a mutant Pac-Man (top right)

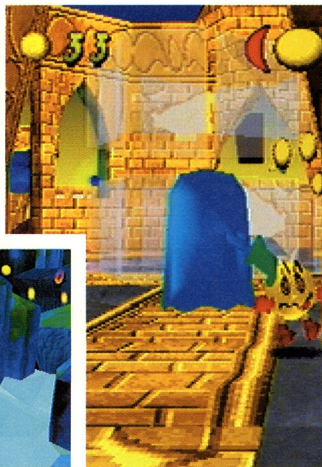
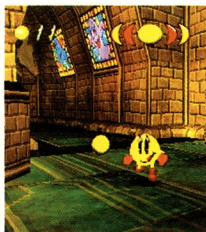
team are artists. From them, Anderson has acquired 40 new enemies, of which, he feels, roughly 35 will make it into the game. Namco also plans to support Sony's new dual analog joystick.

With a wave of 3D platform-hoppers coming to PlayStation this fall (*Croc*, *Crash*, *Gex*, and *Jersey Devil*), this industry icon

Eleven members of the 18-person team are artists

has plenty more in-genre competition now than when he first made his coin-op mark in 1980. But the Namco team in San Jose has certainly taught the old "Man" some new tricks, and for a sixteen-year-old game industry veteran, he is looking remarkably spry.

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Multiple expressions for numerous situations (such as swimming and flying) give the little guy an innocent charisma that is impossible to dislike

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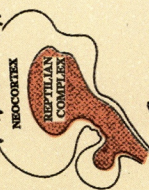
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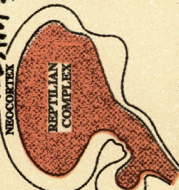
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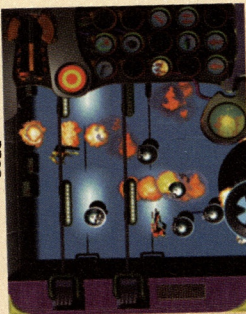
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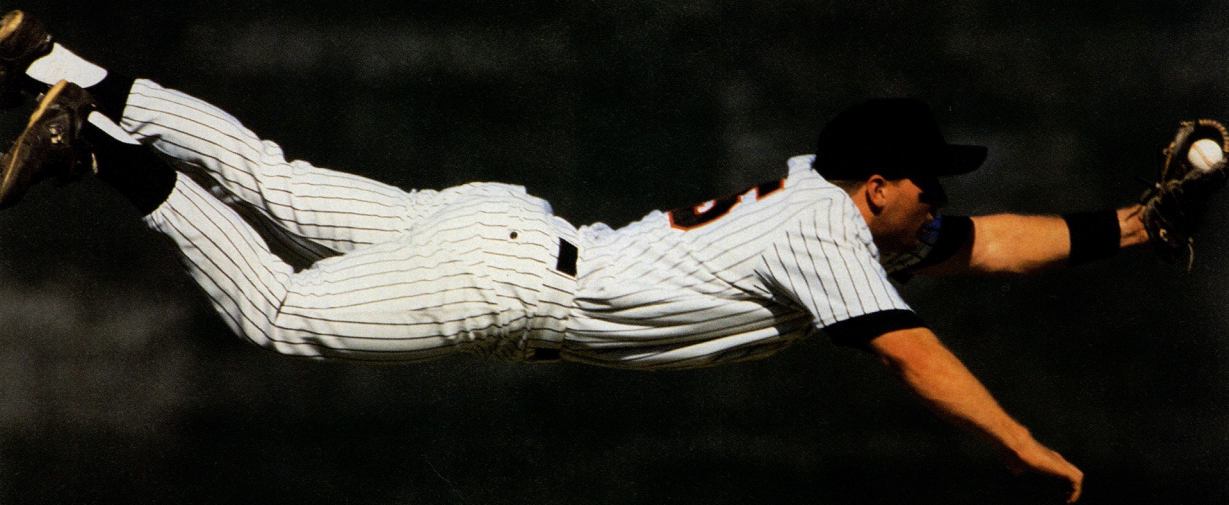
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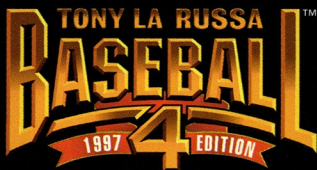
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Rascal



The next PlayStation game from Traveller's Tales breaks away from the platform-hopping pack. Can it catch N64's plumber?

Juan Montes, the general manager of software development for SCEA has said that *Mario 64* could be done on PlayStation. The controversial *Rascal* is quickly closing the wide gap between current PlayStation adventures and Miyamoto's masterpiece.

Rascal exudes a Nintendo-like charm. The character Rascal has tampered with his scientist father's time machine, and players (as Rascal) have to cross time to find their way home. The gameplay includes battling monsters, avoiding traps, and solving puzzles. What isn't traditional is the technical prowess — *Rascal* already runs in hi-res at 60 frames per second, while putting 262,144 different colors on screen simultaneously. And, like *Mario 64*, it is packed with impressive peripheral touches, including reflective chrome textures on suits of armor and a rocking screen effect, which realistically captures the rolling deck in the pirate-ship level.



The Atlantis level boasts some amazing color work. Here the reflective floor beautifully mirrors the strange aqua-colored stone walls



Rascal faces a sizeable dragon (above). Rascal's character (best seen far left) has been designed by Jim Henson's Creature Shop

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Psygnosis
Developer:	Traveller's Tales
Release Date:	January 1998
Origin:	U.K.

The game spans seven worlds, with visits to the Wild West, Atlantis, and the "Time Dimension." While the plot offers an excuse to create a myriad of worlds, the designers have further worked time travel into the design, as each world is presented during three different time periods.

The castle will boast pike-wielding medieval soldiers in the past, and modern laser security systems in the present. Also, *Rascal*'s arsenal includes a time gun. The gun warps enemies to the Time Dimension, where Rascal faces them again at the end of the game.

Even the most biased Nintendo fan has to admit that *Rascal* breaks dangerous new ground on PlayStation. While no company other than Nintendo can lay claim to designer Shigeru Miyamoto's superb work with *Mario 64*, *Rascal* remains a title to watch in 1998.



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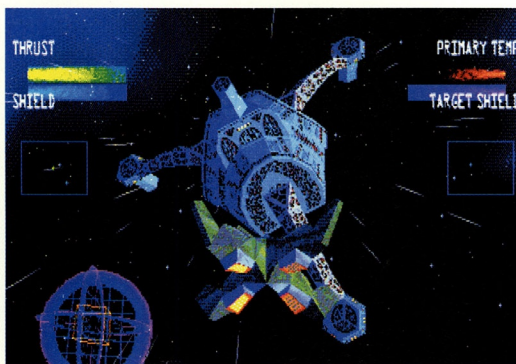
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ng alphas



Colony Wars



The 3D environment enables players to fly anywhere amid these space stations. The gyroscopic radar (above, left corner) is very handy

No need for a film license — Psygnosis puts some thrust into its own intergalactic PlayStation epic

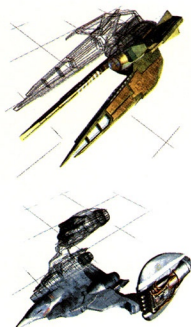


After *Space Invaders* clones, the interstellar cockpit shooter (starting with *Star Raiders*) was the next genre of game to spawn copycats, truly a testament to their once widespread popularity. The genre has since plodded on for 20 years, losing much of its steam with less-than-inspired

Colony Wars gives the genre a much needed kick in the backside

gameplay and saturated with poorly acted FMV segues. Sparking its failing vital signs, Psygnosis gives "the space-shooter" a much needed kick in the backside with *Colony Wars*.

Psygnosis continues to take advantage of — and advance — the powerful graphical effects that it has created for past games. *Colony Wars* ups the ante again, running in hi-res at 30 fps, with huge polygonal spacecraft, brilliant weapon effects, and some fantastically lit spacescapes. The action is sheer arcade; other than some strategic dogfighting maneuvers to learn, the mission objectives and gameplay have been kept relatively simple. With the option to toggle between cockpit and chase views, players pilot six different fighters, each with unique features and weapons.



There are over 56 enemy and ally spacecraft to interact with

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Psygnosis
Developer:	Psygnosis
Release Date:	November 1997
Origin:	U.K.

As with most space shooters, the story remains the same, only the names have changed. Here the Earth government has oppressed lunar colonies so much that they've revolted. As part of the "rebel forces," the player embarks on a nonlinear series of missions to win independence. Initially, the story wasn't nearly as biased; the original design enabled players to fight for either side. However, the team scrapped this option in order to provide a much larger mission base for the game.

The game boasts a total of 70 missions. But the player will see an average of 35 missions from start to finish, as the designers hope to lend replayability to the game. Since most players retry a mission they fail, the team has tried to mask mission failure. According to designer Mike Ellis, if players doesn't meet the necessary objectives, the mission-tree will put them on a less difficult path for the next mission, without beating them over the



ng alphas



The streaking space dust effect (left) lends a sense of speed to the game in an otherwise vacuous environment

head with their defeat. Besides high-quality sound effects, the audio features ship-to-ship dialogue and inspirational orchestral music.

The player will see an average of 35 missions from start to finish

At the recent E3 show, Psygnosis showed itself to be on the console upswing. After its recent streak of less than lukewarm titles, including *Sentient*, *City of Lost Children*, and *League of Pain*, it should rebound with titles such as *Colony Wars* and *Rascal* (see page 87). Psygnosis developers consulted on the design of PlayStation, and in the company's better titles, it shows.

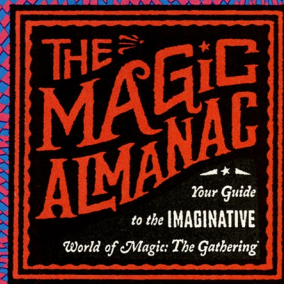
Already *Colony Wars* displays a cohesion that suggests the game as a whole will be worth more than the sum of its parts. (This is the same feeling that infused pre-release copies of *Tomb Raider* and *WipeOut*.) In a world of sub-standard ports (*Wing Commander*, *StarBlade Alpha*), PlayStation owners have had to wait an annoyingly long time for what should be the first native space shooter of merit.

ng



All the ships featured in the 15 minutes of FMV sequences (right) are actually incorporated into the game





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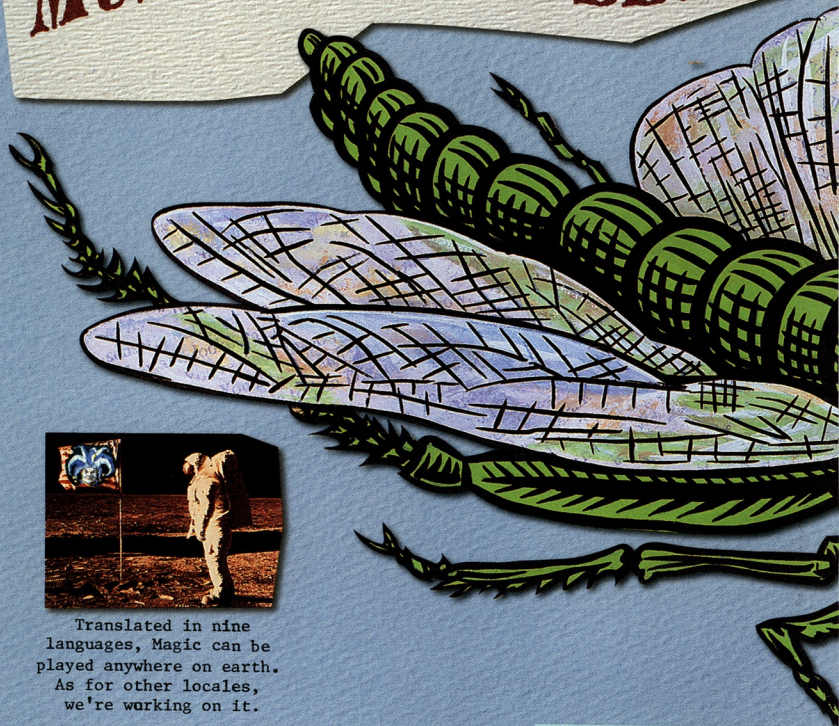


fig. 1b
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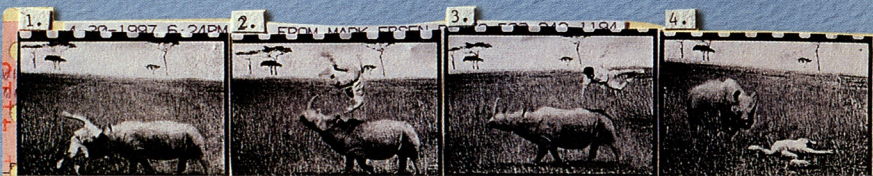
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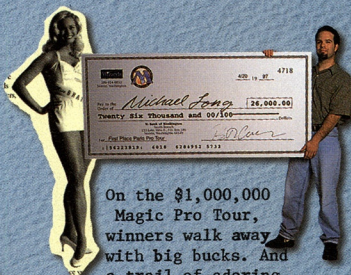


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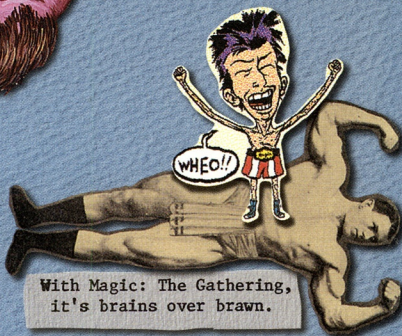
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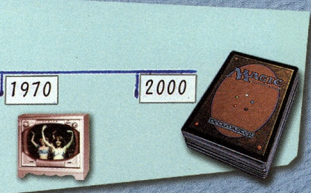
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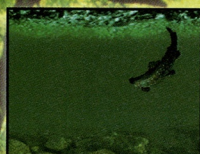


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SiN



Hipnotic is pushing the *Quake* engine — this duct system is a perfect example of the intricate and detailed level design of *SiN*

It seems only fitting that the only game to spawn more imitations than *Doom* is its true sequel, *Quake*. While *Unreal*, *Prey*, and *The Dark Project* are all hot prospects, the clone developers using the *Quake* engine are able to concentrate more

Employees include *Duke Nukem 3D*'s head level designer

energy on level design than engine development, which they hope will translate into better gameplay.

Hipnotic should be on pretty safe ground here — its employees include *Duke Nukem 3D*'s head level designer. Hipnotic's first post-*Duke* effort, *Quake Mission Pack No. 1: Scourge of Armagon*, was the best thing to happen to *Quake* since the Capture the Flag deathmatch.



The crisp polygonal architecture looks almost as if it were pre-rendered

Now it continues its streak with *SiN*. The main character is the leader of a crime task force (as opposed to *Quake*'s vaguely defined space soldier), and the enemies are equally divided between human criminals and alien creations similar to those found in *Quake*.

The raw graphics are the same as *Quake*'s, but the art is well beyond the standard id "dark dungeon" look,

No rest for the wicked — Hipnotic takes the *Quake* engine one step further

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Activision
Developer:	Hipnotic
Release Date:	Spring 1998
Origin:	U.S.

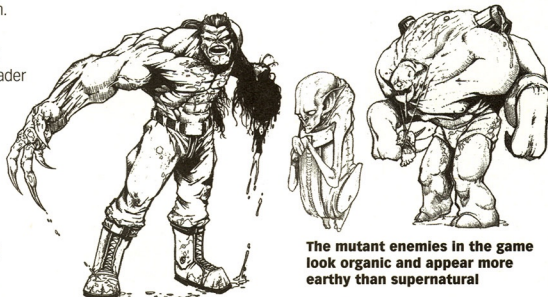


The textures are a good deal more, well, textured than the flat, dirty bitmaps seen in other first-generation *Quake* clones

judging from early screenshots.

Also, *SiN*'s story is more detailed than *Quake*'s (not hard to do, of course), and the player will be able to affect the game's storyline by his or her actions. That's something of a change (as is the female main-boss) from the *Quake* norm — something *SiN* will need a lot of, if it is to stand on its own as a separate game and not just come off as a glorified mission update pack.

ng



The mutant enemies in the game look organic and appear more earthy than supernatural

ng alphas

Hasbro Interactive



Beast Wars features Transformers, as well as some stunning lighting effects; the game will take advantage of MMX-enabled Pentiums on PC

With a number of solid board game conversions under the belt, Hasbro sets its sights higher for the next round of releases

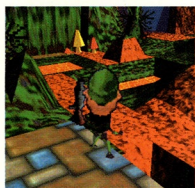
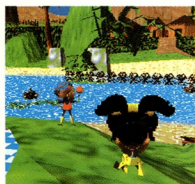


Hasbro has wanted to get into the gaming market for quite some time. After failing in hardware development efforts (notably the ill-fated "Toaster" VR project, although an FMV, videotape-based console is also rumored to have been developed), Hasbro has settled down, releasing several surprisingly high quality versions of its board games such as Scrabble and Monopoly. Now the company is hoping to carry that same level of quality to other properties.

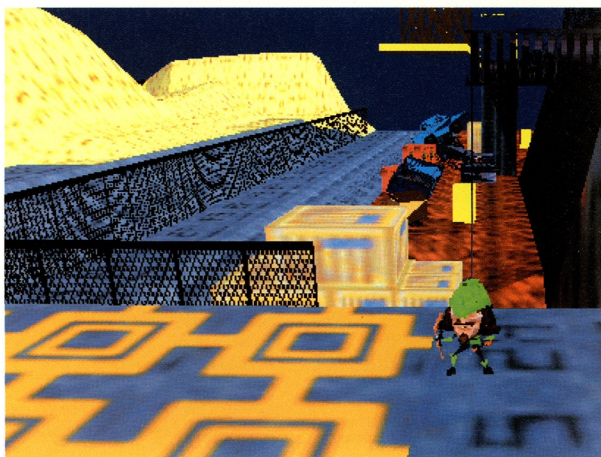
Although the potential for cross-promotion doesn't seem far from Hasbro's thoughts ("Can you imagine the toy tie-in potential of this game?" was a frequent comment during a recent meeting), the company seems far more committed to producing quality software than some software-making toy companies. (Bandai? Are you listening?) *Beast Wars*, for PC and PlayStation, is based on a "Transformers" TV series that pits the (good) Maximals against the (evil) Predacons. Characters can transform in real time from humanoid robots (agile, but easy to damage) to animal robots (strong, but lumbering). The game, done in a third-person, over-the-shoulder view, features 32 missions. There are ten characters to choose from per mission, but if a Transformer is killed it isn't accessible in subsequent missions (unless a first-person, forward-scrolling "rescue mission" is risked, which endangers the rescuer as well). The PC version will

feature LAN and Internet play. Although still early (the September release date seems optimistic), the game is shaping up to be a solid entry in the action/mech genre, with the transforming adding an interesting twist.

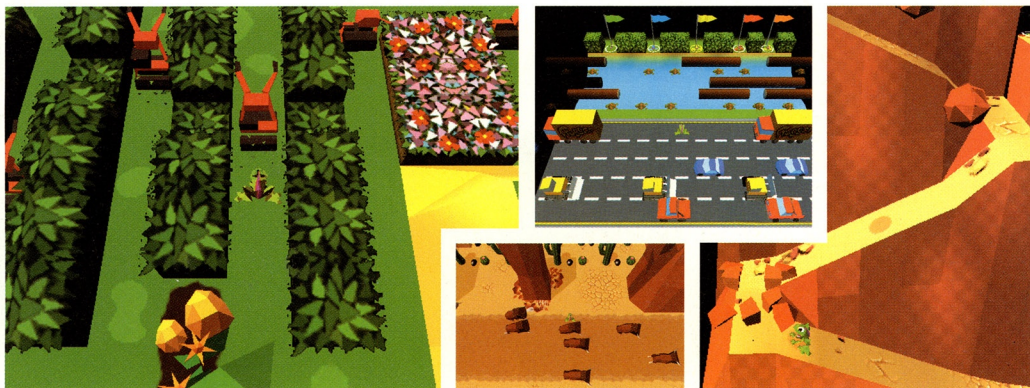
More exciting is PC-only *H.E.D.Z.*, being developed in Scotland by VIS (VIS is also doing *Earthworm Jim 3D* for Interplay). *H.E.D.Z.* offers arena combat with a twist — your character (an alien sport star) can switch heads at will. Five heads (Hedz) can be in your possession at



H.E.D.Z. features multi-leveled gameplay, as well as multiplayer support



ng alphas



Welcome to *Frogger* in 3D. The flat shaded polygons give the game a retro feel, even in 3D, that works well with the license

a time (there are a total of 225 available in the game). Although each head (from rocker Timi Bendrix to Poodle Lady Hed) has unique standard and special attacks, in the interest of play balancing, only about eight types of attacks exist (the Poodle Lady's poodles aren't much different from Aircraft Carrier Hed's planes). If a "Hed" is killed, its icon leaves the player's inventory and enters the arena, where others can nab it. The game supports a persistent, massive multiplayer mode on Microsoft's Zone.com; you can even play "for keeps," with Hed losses and gains permanently recorded on the server (to prevent cheating). VIS plans to introduce custom and rare *Hedz* online, creating a collectors economy of *Hedz* like Segasoft's *Transactor* (see page 68). The humor displayed in the game's art and gameplay should bring a new style to Internet deathmatches.

Wrapping up the '97 line-up is *Frogger* (PC & PlayStation). That's right, everyone's favorite 2D frog has made the leap to 3D.

Gameplay is still very similar to the original, with small (less than 5 screens square) levels.

The frogger team tried huge, *Mario*-style levels, but found that they weren't as fun. Although some new moves are available (a super jump, heat-seeking tongue, and power croak), the game is still playable in traditional style. With 50 levels across 10 different worlds (as well as four-player on PlayStation or PC), the game should live up to the fun (and longevity) of the original. (Trivia note: the original home versions of *Frogger* were done by Parker Bros, now a Hasbro division.)

Considering how many millions Hasbro has invested in videogame technology that never shipped, perhaps it's not surprising that as it begins shipping product, it seems to be getting it right on the first try. With six non-boardgame conversions in the works for '97, Hasbro Interactive may be a force to be reckoned with soon.

ng



There are a wide variety of levels in *H.E.D.Z.* Note the icons which denote which *Hedz* the player has in his or her inventory (the largest is currently being worn). To ensure high detail, the heads are voxels, not polygon models

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Crucible



Whether the venue is the mechanized metal world (above) or the lush earth world (right), the graphics are absolutely gorgeous

Is the latest effort from Maxis *SimDiablo*? Or will it just leave gamers cross?



When Id's *Doom* first hit FTP sites across the world, other companies scrambled to get their versions on the market. Very few of these were memorable: *Dark Forces*, *Descent*, and *Duke Nukem 3D* were the only true standouts. It appears that isometric action RPGs may be easier to improve upon.

The interactivity is a step above anything seen in this genre

Crucible is a cross between *Ultima Underworld II* and *Diablo*. The isometric perspective is executed nicely, and the well-lit outdoor levels are a refreshing change from *Diablo*'s dank and gloomy caverns. Its six different worlds (based on earth, air, water, fire, wood, and metal) each have a distinct motif, from the volcanic instability of Ardory (fire) to the deep steel chasms of Damascus (metal).

The strengths of the game, however, aren't just visual; there is a much deeper story here than the vague quest of *Diablo*. The player's job is to close the gates between the six worlds, to prevent a nameless evil from penetrating them. Players can control any of eight characters, each with different

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Maxis
Developer:	Maxis
Release Date:	November 1997
Origin:	U.S.

abilities, skills, and backgrounds.

The level of interactivity in the game is a step above anything seen in this genre; every object in the game can be altered or destroyed. Even if the player is not in the world, things can change: destroyed walls will be rebuilt, dropped fruit will sprout vines and grow, and so on. There are 24 different species of monster, with variations for each world. It's rare that a first-generation clone of a popular game actually improves upon the original, but *Crucible* should do just that in story, gameplay, and variety.

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Real-time shadows add realism to the environments of the game

Septerra Core

Excepting the *Realms of Arkania* series, the number of true PC-style RPGs in recent years remains in the single digits. The years between *Ultimas* are growing ever wider. When one considers the sheer number of *Myst*, *Command & Conquer*, and *Doom* clones on the PC market today, the dearth of true role-playing games (turn-based combat, an experience point system, weapon and armor shops, and so on) is rather glaring. And now, with Square releasing its *Final Fantasy* series for Windows 95, the market appears to be ripe for console-style RPGs on the PC.

Enter *Septerra Core*. Rabid Entertainment's chip in the RPG pile. The game seems like a cross between the *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star* series. Starting with one main character, players meet up with eight others along the way. This is quite a departure from PC RPGs, which usually begin with the main character already fraternizing with other adventurers in his or her party. *Septerra's* characters vary wildly in personality, background, species, and even composition: among them are a punk

Can console-style RPGs work on the PC?
Rabid intends to find out



Final Fantasy and *Phantasy Star* successfully blended future and fantasy in character design; *Septerra Core* does the same

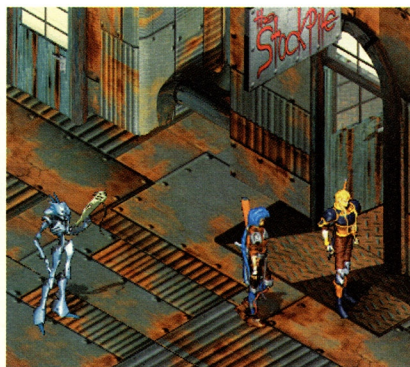
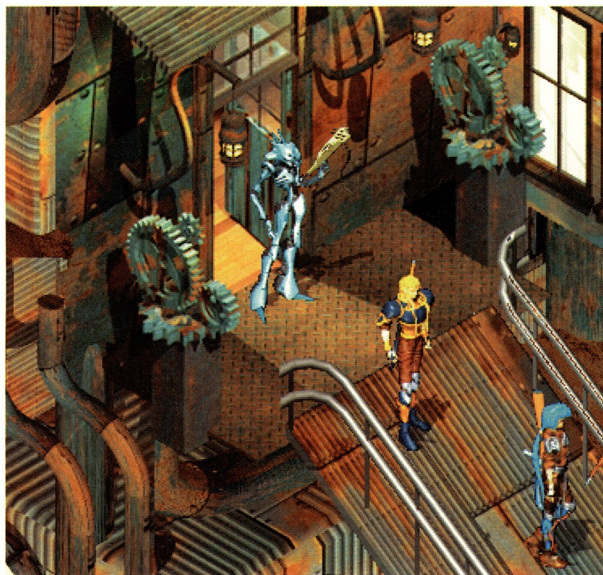


Combat occurs in the same environment as overworld travel (bottom). The battle camera rotates to get the best view on the action (top)

Format:	PC
Publisher:	TBA
Developer:	Rabid Entertainment
Release Date:	Spring 1998
Origin:	U.S.

cybernetics engineer, a paraplegic (but gorgeous) mechanic, a black-hearted, black-clothed witch, and a robotic canine. Each character's development and history is significant enough to warrant comparisons to Square's and Sega's RPG series. The party members have made the transition from concept art to final renders very well. Rabid obviously wants realistic characters — their graphics outclass the character graphics of console RPGs and even compete with big-name PC RPGs. The art is very detailed, and surprisingly Japanese, given that the game was entirely produced in the U.S.

As in *Phantasy Star III*, seven interconnected continents exist in the world. However, they will be more varied than most console RPG worlds. Brian



The backgrounds are similarly themed, but distinct nonetheless

Babendererbe, one of the game's designers, explains, "You have seven continental layers to visit, and each one of those layers has its own unique society and culture. So wherever you go, you're going to find a completely different world to explore." These layers rotate around a central sphere, which presumably contains the game's arch nemesis, a biomechanical computer. Travel between the layers will be frequent; party members, clues, and enemies will be scattered across them toward the beginning of the game. The climate and appearance are rather constant, with a post-apocalyptic look to most of the scenery.

Septerra Core looks and sounds better than a console RPG, however; it runs in 16-bit color at 640-by-480 resolution, with characters and NPCs pre-rendered. There are over 200 locations in the game, none of which is tile-based. "At least, not in the normal sense of the word, where everything has to lay on a boundary," says Babendererbe. "We built a tool that lets us build unique, organic backgrounds, where the environments really come alive." All dialogue in the game is presented in full speech, with a text option available.

The battle and magic systems are reminiscent of *Chrono Trigger*, even if only three of the nine characters can fight. Battles will take place in a combination of turn-based and real-time combat. Players will choose, in real time, from the standard RPG combat menu (fight, magic, item, run) and watch those actions play out in a turn-based system. Spells are contained in special cards, which any character can equip. These spells can be cast alone or can be used with other party members' cards to create combination magic attacks.

Septerra Core is scheduled to hit store shelves months after the releases of

"Wherever you go, you'll find a new world to explore"

Brian Babendererbe, Game Designer

Final Fantasy V, VI, and VII. With the popularity of numerous online RPGs currently on the market, such as *Meridian 59* and *The Realm*, and with the imposing *Ultima Online* on the horizon, the single-player PC-style RPG seems a dying breed. Rabad has followed a number of Square's formulas in creating its game; now it will have to wait and see if it can follow the RPG king's success and resuscitate the genre.

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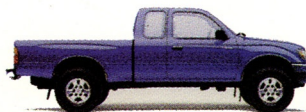


The *Septerra Core* world is alternately mystical (top) and gritty (bottom)

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Nessa no Hoshi

Japanese publisher Itochu produces its own science-fiction-themed adventure



Nessa mixes FMV with real-time game sequences. As Dan, the player searches for water, fights aliens, and returns home to save his mother



Although Itochu (Japan's biggest shipping company) is not very well known for videogames, it first ventured into interactive entertainment two years ago, publishing conversions of titles such as *Colonization*, *Transport Tycoon*, and *Burn Cycle*.

Itochu is now publishing its own games for PlayStation and Saturn: *G-Vector*, a Saturn shoot 'em up; *Mobius Link 2*, a conversion of the successful Windows 95 war sim; a 3D PlayStation version of *Transport Tycoon*; and *Nessa no Hoshi*, an original concept for PlayStation.

Action occurs on a planet where humans and aliens coexist in desert environs. The most vital resource, water, is controlled by the aliens. The player (as Dan) embarks on a quest to find water and saves his mother in the process.

The game features some precalculated sequences, with the player selecting the direction of travel. However, *Nessa* differs from the usual adventure game concept by including fighting stages akin to a 3D beat 'em

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Itochu
Developer:	Itochu
Release Date:	September 1997 (Japan)
Origin:	Japan

up, with throws and special moves between the wandering. Further differences are evident as the game progresses. Players who dislike the combat sequences can complete Dan's journey by exploring and puzzle-solving.

Carlos Kuroda, president of Genki and developer of *Kileak the Blood*, is in charge of the game plot (working independently from his own company). Ichiro Itano, designer of some popular PlayStation fighters, is responsible for character animation and rendered sequences.


Combining two game genres is not a new concept. SquareSoft, for example, has tried twice with the *Tobal* series by including a weak "quest" mode with the fighting action. It will be interesting to see whether Itochu has more success with this intriguing title.

ng



Nessa borrows heavily from *Dune*, as seen in these environments





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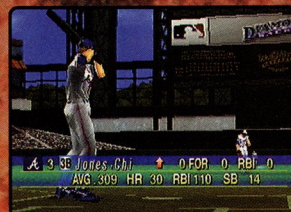
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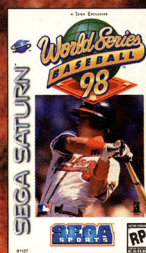


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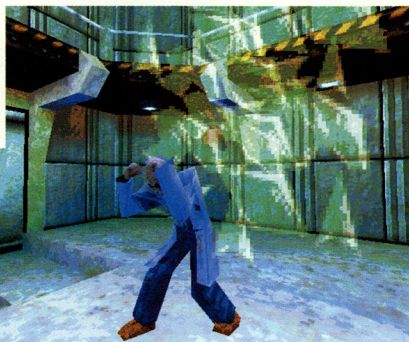


Half Life

Fledgling developer Valve gussies up the *Quake* engine and comes up with a winner



The creatures of *Half Life* hide a secret beneath their textured polygon skins: a skeletal animation system that enables complex movement



Format:	PC CD-ROM
Publisher:	Sierra
Developer:	Valve
Release Date:	November 1997
Origin:	U.S.

Founded a year ago by Gabe Newell and Mike Harrington, a pair of ex-Microsoft programmers, Seattle-based Valve has licensed the *Quake* engine for its first title,

Half Life incorporates a number of adventure game elements

Half Life. Not content to crank out another *Quake* clone, the team has grown to a staff of 20, including *Duke Nukem* artist Chuck Jones from 3D Realms, John Guthrie from the *Quake Command* website, and Ben Morris who wrote the definitive *Quake* level design toolset, WorldCraft.

Newell explains that they are "definitely going to have lots of running around, shooting, deathmatching, and the traditional elements that appeal to the action gamer." But they don't think that's

enough. "We're assuming that people who are interested in *Half Life* have played these other games. We've played them. We know what they're like, and we're looking for something new and exciting." As a result, *Half Life* incorporates a number of adventure game elements and a more complex set of puzzles than the "find the key, open the door" affairs usually found in first-person games.

The *Quake* engine has had much of its code replaced with new modules of Valve's own design. Under senior software development engineer Ken Birdwell, the team has added colored lighting, transparency effects, a variety of new AI routines for different creatures and, perhaps most importantly, replaced the vertex-based character animation system found in *Quake* with a skeletal-based system. Vertex animation essentially



Valve's retooled *Quake* engine supports high-color (65,536 colors)



Valve's creature designs show a certain flair for the macabre

requires a different polygon mesh for each keyframe. But skeletal animation uses a single mesh and controls movement through a series of "bones" inside the model, deforming the mesh as required.

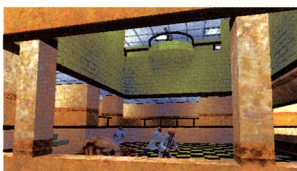
A test animation shown to **Next Generation** demonstrates the advantage of the process; a public domain robot model (not featured in the game) danced in a room. Birdwell explains, "This was put in to see if it would break the engine, and it actually didn't. It's 6,000 polygons, it's dancing, it has a chrome surface. You couldn't do that the way *Quake* animates monsters. It would be 3,500 vertices times 250 animation frames — you wouldn't have enough memory. But he only has 20 some bones, so it's cheap."

The AI is sophisticated

as well. Creatures exhibit pack behavior, flock like birds, take cover, provide supporting fire, and perform a number of other detailed behaviors. "It's very important that monsters be more interesting," Newell continues. "Monsters do a threat assessment on you; they see how much health you have and what kind of weapon you have. For example, in the game there's a pack animal called a houndeye, and if you walk around the corner and see one and you've got a rocket launcher, it's going to yip and run away because it's not stupid. It won't just see you and automatically attack. That's boring. Instead, it will flee, follow a path,



The bearded fellow is, believe it or not, the player's character (above). The three-legged Houndeye is a pack animal that acts like one (top)



Evil scientists and mutant brain-sucking critters are just a few of the nasties



and look around for other monsters like itself. When it gets enough of them, then it will come back and look for you."

The engine also includes scripted sequences and conversation with non-player characters. Newell says, "John will tell you about a sequence he's done where a scientist is up there waving at

"We're looking for something new that's going to excite us"

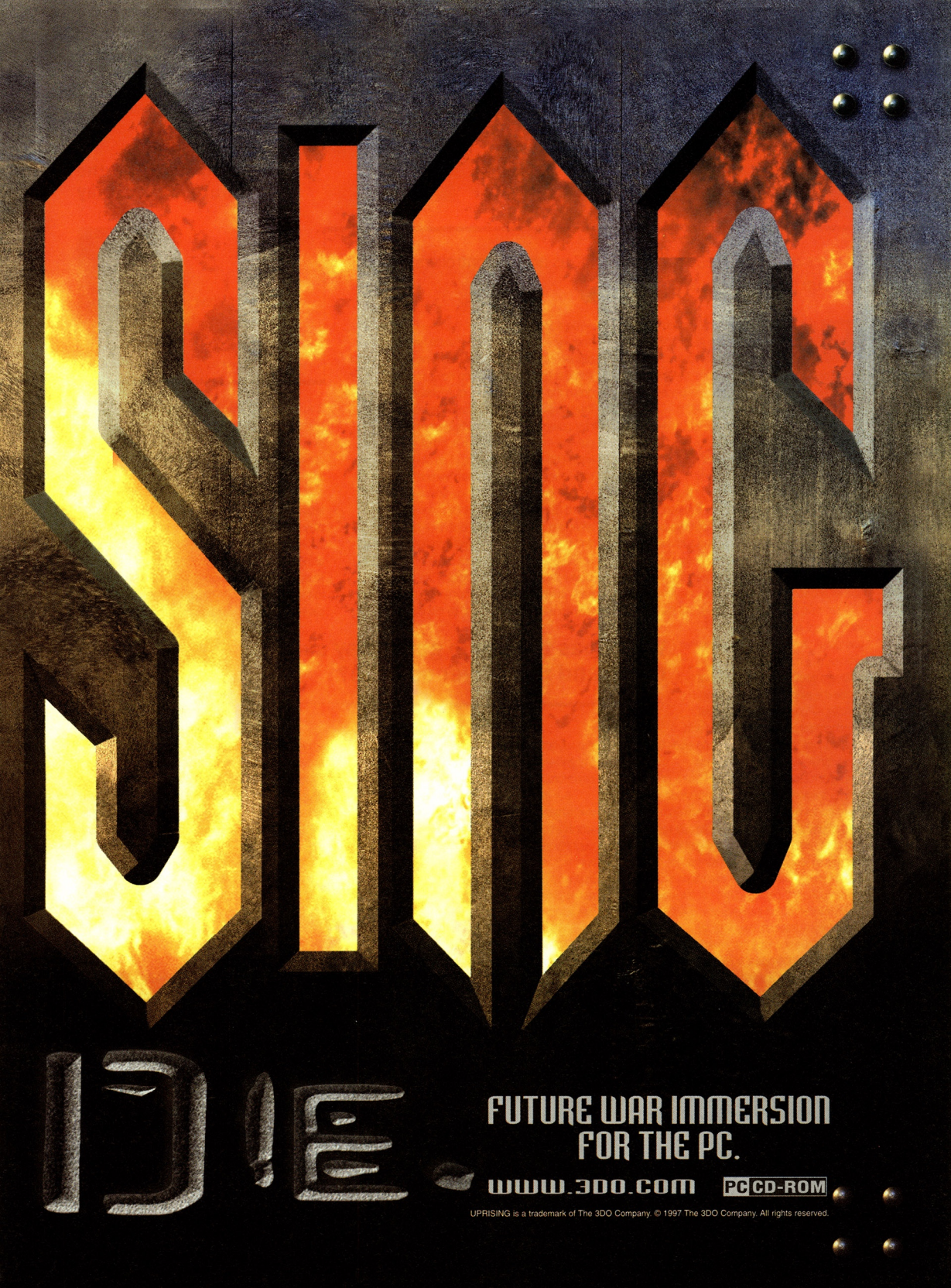
Gabe Newell, Co-founder, Valve

you, and when you look at him, a monster will break through the wall and tear him in half and throw him down. We built the scene in 3D Studio Max with Character Studio, and then using Ken's animation engine we can put that scene right into the game. After the scene is run, they go back to behaving like 'normal' characters, but that ability to insert events and interactions in the game is something that we think people will respond to."

Half Life will support MMX, Direct 3D, OpenGL, and multiplayer games of up to 32 combatants. But deathmatches do little to convey the complexity and detail Valve is committed to giving *Half Life*. "It's an active world," Newell finishes. "Things are going on whether you're there or not. It's not about a bunch of things standing around waiting for you to shoot them. This world is alive."

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The way games ought to be...

In search of the future of gameplay

Gamers demand "Freedom of speech!" as analog controllers open up new gaming possibilities

In last month's fire-stoking introductory column I talked about gaming's potential to grow and evolve into a rich and sophisticated artistic medium. My point was that, compared to the interactive experiences that await us in years to come, 1997's videogames will — although fun today — seem as simple and as rudimentary as a horse and carriage parked next to a Ferrari Testarossa. "So what? Big deal," you may say, and sure, progress is inevitable and it's not surprising that games are going to get more and more sophisticated. But I'm not just talking about more eye-popping graphics or new trouser-troubling audio effects. This column is all about the new experiences that gaming — or interactive entertainment, to use its broader name — will offer players.

I'm talking about the prospect of games that include real conversations with computer characters, challenges that require, say, moral as well as strategic decisions, and roles that probe the whole range of human abilities — not just our primordial penchant for wandering around and killing things. Indeed, this perhaps leads us to a better analogy than the horse and carriage/Testarossa comparison. Think of today's games as akin to the life of a prehistoric apeman: there's a lot of kill-or-be-killed survivalism, there's a lot of physical negotiation of difficult terrain, and a lot of solitary hunting and gathering (substitute gold rings and power-ups for berries and mammoth cutlets), but there's precious little of the "civilized" behavior and complexity that make human life so interesting in 1997. Where are the conversation, the laughter and tears, the emotional turmoil, and the interpersonal relationships? Compare your sophisticated life to that of a grunting apeman and you realize how much humans have evolved. Games are going to do the same thing.

But, as with any evolutionary journey, it's a matter of small but significant steps forward. This month, I want to concentrate on a couple little steps that the PC market started taking a few years ago and that the consoles are just beginning to match. I'm talking about analog control, and why it's so important.

Talking to your computer (come on, we all do it)

To start with, let's think about what a game is, exactly. To break it down to its core, every game

— be it *Super Mario 64* or *Tetris* — is simply an ongoing exchange of information between a human player and a computer running a piece of game software. Information flows from the player down the joystick, mouse, or keyboard cable into the computer, and information flows from the computer screen and loudspeakers to the player's eyes and ears. Put another way, if this interaction can be thought of as akin to a conversation, the computer "listens" through its keyboard or joystick, "thinks" about what it has heard using its processors (according to whatever rules the game software has given it), and then "speaks" via images on its monitor and sound through its speakers. Simultaneously, the player "listens" to the computer via eyes and ears, thinks about this information using a human brain, and "speaks" to the computer via

Why does the game get to say so much and the player so little?

the keyboard or joystick using the "vocabulary" the game has allocated to button pushes and directional controls.

But does this "conversation" constitute a fair exchange of information? Hardly. If a picture is worth a thousand words (and this is a conservative estimate) and a game's graphics run at 30 frames (or pictures) per second, then, in this "conversation" between computer and game player, the computer speaks 30,000 words per second, not including sound. Not even Senator Lieberman can match this. And the game player? Well, how many directional movements and button clicks can you manage on a conventional joystick per second? Five? Six, maybe? Let's generously assume you're a nervous *Street Fighter II* fanatic having drunk 14 double espressos and let's say you can manage ten. This still means that in this conversation the computer is cramming in a 3,000 word monologue for each of your solitary utterances. So already we see that there is a fundamental imbalance in this "conversation" between computer and gameplayer, and it is this imbalance — or, more specifically, how little input the player actually gets to contribute — that leads to much of gaming's current limitations.

Because the game player gets to say so little in this "conversation," the interactive experience

is fundamentally restricted. By reducing a human's entire repertoire of communication (which normally includes an entire orchestra of speech, tone-of-voice, mannerisms, body language, gesticulation) to a mere ten "yes" or "no" ("on" or "off") joystick twitches per second (espressos permitting) it's denying the game player his or her full range of expression. It's like asking him or her to commentate the Superbowl using only smoke signals. Essentially, it's like stripping the player's communicative skills down to those of a baby. Or those of a prehistoric caveman. And if you can only communicate on a caveman-like level, then it's no wonder that you can only interact with the game world on a caveman-like level. And this means that you're reduced to wandering around and killing things.

So, we can see that games will have a hard time evolving or incorporating more sophisticated roles and challenges until the computer is able to spend more of its time "listening" to the player, and the player is given a broader vocabulary with which to "speak." Until we can say more than "go up," "go right," or "use object B," that's all that our game characters will be able to do. Our challenge, then, is to give game players a broader palette of communication skills. Only then will we have the foundations upon which more complex games can be built.

Don't lecture me!

But before we look at possible solutions to this problem, we need to examine why the problem exists and acknowledge some basic limitations in the relationship between the game player and the computer. Why is there this imbalance in the first place? Why does the game get to say so much and the player so little?

There are three main reasons. First, humans are smarter than computers. Sure, your Pentium 200 is going to figure out a mathematical problem, such as **Next Generation's** circulation multiplied by the speed of light, quicker than you (or even our sales reps) could, but try asking it why **Next Generation** sells so many copies in the first place and you're going to be waiting a

by Neil West

Neil West is
Next Generation's
editor-at-large



long time for a reply (significantly longer than with one of our sales reps, anyway). And because humans are so much smarter, it not only means that we can handle "hearing" (and then subsequently "thinking about") more words per second than a computer can, but also that we are better equipped to put the limited bandwidth of communication allocated to us to good use. So we cut the computer some slack and accommodate its weaknesses.

The second reason why this problem perpetuates, however, comes down to the laziness of most game designers. Sure, an imbalance between what the player says and what the game says is inevitable, for the reasons outlined above, but the extent of this imbalance and the degree to which it is compensated for is down to the game's development team. Sure, the very best games (say, *Street Fighter II* or *Descent*) try to minimize the imbalance and make sure that the player gets to "say" as much as is possible. As a result, the player has a large degree of control over the game and is listened to attentively — when you say jump, the game character jumps.

But unfortunately, this kind of dedication to maximum interactivity costs time and money. Why? Because keeping the level of player interaction down to a minimum not only saves the cost of developing the complicated software necessary to cope with all these pesky player commands and interferences, but it also enables the computer to devote its processing muscle to bombarding the player with cool visual effects without fear of interruption. Sure, it may look great. But it plays like crap. The reality is that the more the imbalance is left unchecked, the easier and cheaper it is to make the game. It will look better, too (and we all know that the better a game looks, the better it will sell). Typically, then, all too many games (and FMV titles are the worst offenders) let this imbalance slide toward the maximum and leave the player with practically nothing to say at all.

The third reason why game players' "speech" is so restricted is that standard game controllers simply aren't up to the job of giving players a broad enough vocabulary with which to communicate. Especially on consoles. All traditional joypads (including the original Saturn and PlayStation pads) are digital controllers; in other words, all the buttons and directional pads are either pushed "on" or left "off" — there is no middle ground or shades of gray. Because gamers have gotten used to this arrangement, it doesn't — on the surface — seem to be any big problem. But imagine if cars worked this way. Imagine if in your car you could either accelerate

with the pedal to the floor or not at all, you could slam on the brakes or not brake at all, and — perhaps most worryingly — you could steer only in eight preset directions, with no slight degrees of turn in-between. Driving in the real world would be impossible. And how can we expect our games to become more realistic if our means of controlling these games is so flawed?

Sure, it's possible to fudge digital control to enable shades of gray by taking into account the timing of button presses (tap the button for a

vocabulary is simply the bare minimum step forward needed to keep up with the spectacular strides taken in graphics. Besides, for every new game that does require more complex control, there are at least half a dozen that require no more player input than the games of 20 years ago. *Sega Rally* on the Saturn requires no more from the player — in terms of vocabulary — than Atari's *Pole Position*.

As for persuading designers to hold back on the uninterrupted visual feasts and devote more

energy to devising ways for players to have more control, well — **Next Generation** has been campaigning for this (albeit in not so many words) for years. It's the same "gameplay versus graphics" (or, more accurately,

"never graphics at the expense of gameplay") debate that has raged since videogaming began. Unfortunately, as long as uninformed consumers judge a game by the screenshots on its package, then game developers will cater to them.

Which brings us to the third problem, and with it, the very neat solution (that has existed on PCs for years): analog control. Analog control provides the shades of gray that digital controllers don't — you don't have to turn full left or full right, you have the option of gentle left or gentle right, and many degrees of turn in-between. All of a sudden the vocabulary of "words" (or shades of gray) than others, but anything is better than nothing and the new wave of analog pads (pioneered by the Nintendo 64 controller and now bolstered by analog pads from Sega and Sony) is a great start. All three of these pads offer analog directional control, and the next step will be pressure-sensitive buttons (the game player will be able to say not only "punch," but also "punch with 10% force," "punch with 30% force," "punch with 100% force," and so on).

And while these controllers may start off being used by players merely to kill things, explore terrains, and hunt and gather in a more sophisticated manner, they are nevertheless a significant building block in the foundations of bigger, better, and more exciting games to come. By giving gamers a larger vocabulary, they are facilitating a greater freedom of speech. And that has to be a good thing.

What's the solution? How can we give the player more to say?

short jump, hold down the button longer for a larger jump), and we've all subconsciously gotten used to the "tap turns" of most console racing games (alternately pressing and releasing a directional control to "steer" a computer car around a shallow bend). But this is never an ideal solution, if for no other reason than holding down a button for longer than a fraction of a second means you have to stop controlling other aspects of the game, and in the case of steering computer cars — hell, it's just not realistic.

Everyone's a control freak

So, what's the solution to this problem? How can we give the player more to say? Let's look at the obstacles one by one.

As for the problem of computers simply not being smart enough, an obvious answer is to simply wait for computers to become more powerful and hence able to "listen" better. Even if only 10% of the computer's processing power

Analog provides the shades of gray that digital controllers don't

remains devoted to "listening," if the overall processing power pie is getting bigger then the 10% slice given to "listening" gets bigger also. In this manner, several steps forward have been taken over the history of videogaming to date — perhaps the most significant of which have resulted from the move to 3D graphics.

As PCs and the consoles found themselves able to create game worlds in 3D as opposed to 2D, game designers were obligated to provide players with a greater range of control — a larger vocabulary of words with which to "speak." Instead of just "up," "down," "left," and "right," gamers generally now require "rotate left" and "rotate right," or "move towards" and "move away," to negotiate these 3D terrains. But, generally speaking, this kind of increased

Want to respond?

If you have any comments, criticisms, or questions, e-mail Neil West at theway@next-generation.com or write "The Way Games Ought To Be," **Next Generation**, Imagine Publishing, 150 North Hill Drive, Brisbane, CA 94005. E-mail is, of course, best.

Star Fox 64 Nintendo Wild Arms PlayStation Gundam Gaiden 3 Saturn Emperor of the Fading Suns PC
X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter PC Outlaws PC Redneck Rampage PC Hummer Arcade Maximum Force Arcade

finals

You snooze, you miss our reviews

- 113 Nintendo 64
- 115 PlayStation
- 117 Saturn
- 118 PC
- 124 Macintosh
- 126 Arcade

We here at Next Generation want you to know what games rock and which ones stink. Our reviews tell you why we love or hate a particular game, but our star-rating system, which is outlined below, gives you a pretty good idea of how we feel about a game.

★★★★★ **Revolutionary**
Brilliantly conceived and flawlessly executed; a new high watermark.

★★★★ **Excellent**
A high quality and inventive new game. Either a step forward for an existing genre or a successful attempt at creating a new one.

★★★ **Good**
A solid and competitive example of an established game style.

★★ **Average**
Perhaps competent — certainly uninspired.

★ **Bad**
Crucially flawed in design or application.

Ⓒ Denotes a review appearing on the Next Generation Disc.

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Nintendo 64

GOOOALLL!

Konami leads the field in soccer games, and gives N64 one of its best games yet

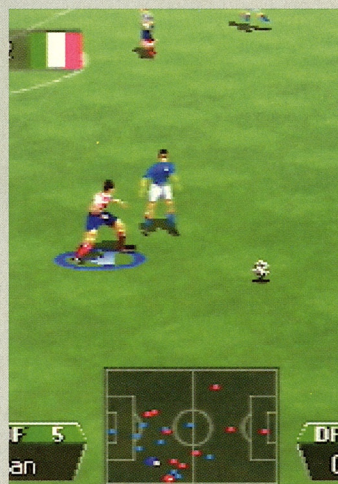


Purposely fouling a player can be a great strategy if the ref is looking the other way

International Superstar Soccer
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami

Simply put, this is the game FIFA 64 should have been. Released in Japan (and reviewed in **NG 30**) as *J-League Perfect Striker*, Konami's entry into the soccer game field is an impressive showing and even gives the undisputed champ, the *Worldwide Soccer* series for Saturn, a run for its money.

The polygonal graphics are crisp, nicely animated, and unbelievably realistic. Underneath the gorgeous look of *International Superstar Soccer* lies superb gameplay that makes it the best-playing soccer game available. Real



The polygon players are absolutely astonishing. Easily the best on the system



Touches such as leading your striker with a through pass make *ISS* a mental and physical challenge

soccer strategies and ball movement are required in order to have any chance in a game. The level of control is unparalleled; players can perform headers, lobbs, crosses, feints, bicycle kicks, through passes, scissors kicks, speed burst, give and gos, volleys, and intentional fouls. The player really has control of all the moves.

The domestic version improves upon the original by adding some international team licenses (and recognizable players, if you're the sort of fan who would recognize them) and tweaking the single-player AI, so it's not the goal-fest released in Japan. Details like refs of varying skill, different weather conditions, real stadiums, and attitude give even more depth to a game that gets just about everything right. *International Superstar Soccer* is easily the best Nintendo 64 sports game, and it really puts FIFA 64 in its rightful place (the bottom).

Rating: ★★★★★

rating

Hexen

Publisher: GT Interactive
Developer: Id Software,
 Raven, Software Creations



Hexen appeared on the PC in the early years of first-person shooters and replaced a hellish backdrop with a gothic theme. On N64, though, that's not enough. Compared to other Nintendo 64 games in this genre, *Hexen* tweaks the norm just enough to make it stand out, but that doesn't mean it's all good news.

Hexen boasts great four-player, split-screen deathmatch action so gamers can enjoy the built-in multiplayer features of Nintendo 64. Multiple character choices (Mage, Fighter, Cleric), 30 levels, and options to campaign as a team make *Hexen* very likable and bring gamers the goodies they want when they pay over \$70. Compared to *Doom 64* and *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, with only one-player modes, *Hexen* seems like a good buy, especially if you like to play with friends.

However, while GT successfully ported the popular PC gameplay, the company left behind the visual and sound effects to wrap up the deal. The graphics are atrocious, with mip-mapping and anti-aliasing working against their purposes for the first time — they actually mar the visual effect of enemy creatures.

The 2D sprites are annoyingly old-fashioned compared to almost any other



***Hexen* is a great four-player game with terrible graphics and bad sound effects**

Nintendo 64 game (even *Doom 64* sported full 3D in the backgrounds), and the frame rate is slow, slow, slow. Almost no clipping problems exist, which is a relief, but trees, magic items, and other 2D objects are incredibly unbelievable in their 3D world.

The music is engaging and sparks the same primal feel the original *Doom* captured, but the sound effects are awful, they clang and pop with unappetizing regularity. This yin-yang effect only creates additional imbalance in the game's overall feel.

Nintendo 64 offers so many advantages that it's a shame to see *Hexen* show up so lopsided. If for the duration of your gaming experience you could forget how bad it looks, you might enjoy the gameplay. But is this any way to play a game?

Rating: ★★

Nintendo 64

Super Foxy



***StarFox 64* brings the fun back to shooters (top). Lighting effects, water reflections, and boss designs are impeccably exercised in the sequel to the 16-bit game**

Nintendo's update of the 16-bit classic is everything it should be



StarFox 64

Publisher: Nintendo of America
Developer: Nintendo Co. Ltd.



As yet another example of Nintendo's determination to create sequels of 16-bit games, *StarFox 64*, a formidable 3D shooter with Barney-esque, puppet-like characters, crosses the console bridge with more flair than *Mario Kart 64*, but it isn't the amazing leap made by *Super Mario 64*. Still, *StarFox 64* is in many ways a technological jump, at least for cartridge-based games.

Staggered throughout the game are eloquent cinematic sequences: moderately short scenes appear before and after gameplay, not in place of it. The game also boasts a remarkable amount of voice sampling for a cart game, turning each team member's former burbles into real-live voice samples. Although certainly not a CD-ROM-killer, *StarFox*, like *Super Mario 64* before it, is an example of what Nintendo hopes other developers can achieve on cart.

The game itself is an exceptional shooter, deep with gameplay, strategy, and calculated level progression mechanics. Like *StarFox* on Super NES, Slippy the frog, Peppy the hare, and Falco the falcon join Fox McCloud as they fly through space in their patented Arwing fighters in forward-scrolling fashion. Players also pilot a submarine and tank depending on the various mission objectives.

A path of as many as 15 interconnected levels are playable in the single-player mode, each with beautifully designed bosses such as a humongous clam, a molten lava-monster, and an amazing animated monkey head (and hands). A clever set of paths are opened when players kill a specified number of enemies, follow an unusual path, shoot subtle objects and enemies, or fly through special constructs. This branch system, unlike the selectable paths of the 16-bit *StarFox*, makes this often formulaic game a bit more challenging.

Four-player, split-screen action deepens the game's overall value, with selectable variations, such as team-play or all-out "death-matches." For beginners, a practice mode is also available. And let's not forget that the joyad-shaking Rumble Pak, bundled with the game, adds an unusual level of tactile interaction. This feature alone gives the game an extremely unique touch.

The worst thing one can say about *StarFox* is that its formulaic nature makes for less than stupendous replay value. Also, given the original was also in 3D, gameplay is extremely similar. But the branching system, numerous secret paths, intelligently designed levels, original bosses, and multiplayer gaming all add up to overcome what's essentially an inherent weakness in any shooter. Ultimately what *StarFox* demonstrates best is that shooters aren't dead at all. In fact, the game proves just the opposite.

Rating: ★★★★★



The four-player split-screen mode gives *StarFox 64* a boost over other shooters

PlayStation

All-Star Baseball '97 featuring Frank Thomas

Publisher: Acclaim
Developer: Iguana

Due to the plethora of baseball games available for PlayStation, it takes more than a good game to stand out in the crowd. In fact, it takes something extraordinary. *Triple Play '98* has the exceptional graphics, *Bottom Of The*



In this year's *All Star Baseball*, every player doesn't look like Big Frank — just every other player

Ninth '97 has the arcade feel, and *MLB '98* has the fast gameplay.

Unfortunately, *All-Star Baseball '97* doesn't excel in any one area. Instead, it is a decent looking game with average gameplay, so-so sound, and not much else to separate it from the pack. The digitized players are very sharp, but the lack of textures on the uniforms leaves the game looking very generic, especially when compared to the beautiful *Triple Play '98*. The batting/pitching interface is about as simple as it gets; pitch the ball and time the hit.

For all that *ASB '97* doesn't do, it is still a good, solid baseball game. Unfortunately, others are much better.

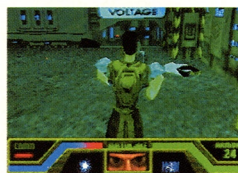
Rating: ★★

Broken Helix
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami

It probably seemed like a good idea on paper. Take a third-person action title (very popular these days), hire a popular

actor to do voice-overs (the ever-acerbic Bruce "Evil Dead" Campbell), and place it in the mysterious, yet trendy, Area 51. Can't lose, eh? Think again. Konami's *Broken Helix* undoubtedly looked good on said paper, but the final execution is something else entirely.

A civilian scientist working at Area 51 has gone off the deep end and planted bombs all over the base. Jake Burton (voice supplied by Mr. Campbell) must infiltrate the base, avoid being detected by roving security cameras,



Broken Helix's over-the-shoulder perspective is nice, but you can't always see what's going on

defuse the bomb, and find out what's going on. And, if it's Area 51, you just know some slimy aliens are behind it all.

To avoid detection, Jake must crawl past the cameras and shoot them from the ground. Usually this works, although sometimes he gets detected even when staying low. And when detection equals endgame, this can be very frustrating.

The majority of the game — searching for keys to open doors, shooting monsters — is decent enough, although nothing new. The only real difference here is the perspective (third-person rather than first), which sometimes works to your disadvantage — jumping on the alien spiders, for example, is extremely difficult given the perspective and the camera's insistence on staying behind your head.

With a little more work on the graphics and camera, and a little less work on the annoying voice-overs (Bruce Campbell aside), *Broken Helix* may have been a four-star title. As it is, it's barely worth three.

Rating: ★★★

PlayStation

Breaking Away

Dynasty Warriors

Publisher: KOEI
Developer: Omega-Force

KOEI, long content to release one historical military sim after another, has officially entered the fighting arena with *Dynasty Warriors*. Developed in-house by KOEI's own Omega-Force, *Dynasty Warriors* is an intriguing mix of *Tekken*-like polygonal fighters, a difficult but ultimately rewarding defense system, and a deep and complex backstory based on actual, historic figures. While it may not seem immediately like a KOEI game, it's the last of these three elements that gives it away.

Set in second century China, *Dynasty Warriors* concerns the exploits of three warlords, each fighting to take control of the whole country. If this sounds familiar, it is — it's the same backstory for KOEI's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This translates surprisingly well to the fighting medium, adding a much needed sense of history and realism to the typically fantasy-based genre.

Weapon-based, rather than hand-to-hand, combat is the order of the day with swords, staffs, spears, and fighting sticks all making appearances. Unlike Square's *Bushido Blade*, which lets you choose



Each weapon has its own reach, so a new strategy must be adopted for each opponent

a different weapon depending on a fighter's strength, characters here have fixed weapons (actually the weapons which, historically, they favored in battle). Of course, each weapon has a different reach, so new strategies must be adopted for each new opponent.

While the game looks good and is 60fps fast, it does have its problems. The defense system is difficult to master, offering two different parries plus the obligatory back block. Once mastered though, defensive moves can become particularly effective at turning a match in your favor. The 3D sidestep, while seemingly nice on paper, is too short to actually dodge an attack. The backgrounds are also woefully flat (this is the apparent trade-off for the game's smooth pace).

KOEI takes a stab at something besides an historical strategy game and nails it

Button-mashers beware: *Dynasty Warriors* is not the kind of game you can pick up and instantly master. It takes time to learn, especially where defense is concerned. However, it is a well thought-out and executed game that deserves as much attention as its closest rivals *Namco's Soul Blade* and *Square's Bushido Blade*.

Rating: ★★★★★



Like all good fighting games, *Dynasty Warriors* has the obligatory power move

rating

Need For Speed II

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: EA Studios

One of the most poorly executed racing games ever released on PlayStation, *Need For Speed* was inexplicably one of the best-selling racing titles for the platform. Roughly a year later, *Need For Speed II* arrives — it's improved but still riddled with technical shortcomings that keep it from the upper tier of racing games.

A constant problem for the series, *Need For Speed II*'s graphics remain a point of concern. The first NFS game had an atrocious frame rate and an unappealing graininess. Although still not great, the frame rate has been increased in *NFSII*, and overall the graphics and resolution have been incrementally improved. What hasn't been improved is the horrible pop-in. Like annoying in-laws who drop in unannounced, the draw-in is actually irritating enough to obfuscate what could be a good time. What verges on inexcusable is that the frame-rate improvements in the one-player game are disturbingly absent from the split-screen, two-player game.

Conceptually, *Need For Speed II* is right on: take the fastest and most exotic super cars in the world and offer an intriguing array of open-road courses for players to go wild on. In terms of design, the six huge tracks are nicely done, and additional tracks are hidden. However, given the poor play mechanics, the plentiful tracks just can't save this game. Game control is hardly communicative and leaves the player mired in brake lock-ups and spinouts rather than giving the



Super cars and imaginative track designs help to make up for technical deficiencies in *NFSII*

ability to explore the vehicle's limits in exhilarating powerslides. The only solution is to back off in the turns and to reserve extreme high speeds for the straight-aways. The result is a playable game, but one a lot less enjoyable than it should be.

Rating: ★★

Rage Racer

Publisher: Namco
Developer: Namco

While there's no denying *Ridge Racer* was one of the more solid first-

generation PlayStation titles, it was, at its core, a fun but short racing game. *Ridge Racer Revolution*, while equally as fun as the first, did little to upgrade the series and pointed out how limited the three-in-one track system really was. Now, four years on from the original arcade release of *Ridge Racer*, Namco brings out the third in the series for

PlayStation — *Rage Racer*.

Undoubtedly the most graphically impressive of the three, *Rage Racer* brings a new sense of class to the series, with winding hills and backdrops resembling European cities. Set on a fictional island, the four tracks wind through Mediterranean seaside towns and Bavarian villages. There's even a San

Francisco hill climb with a chugging cable car. It's the hills, though, that breathe fresh life into this racer, adding a new sense of strategy to the slightly stale racing style.

The customization feature is also new, which lets you change the color and logos on your vehicles. While a nice touch, it doesn't add tremendously to

PlayStation

A Hello to Arms

Sony's latest is a small RPG treasure



Fighting the bosses is a visual treat and a strategic challenge (above). Guardian runes are just a small collection of the items you'll have to horde throughout *Wild Arms* (top)

Wild Arms

Publisher: SCEA
Developer: Mediavision

In a definite point of departure from last year's disappointing *Beyond the Beyond*, SCEA's latest RPG offering, *Wild Arms*, shows that the company has learned from past mistakes. With a strong storyline, brilliant background music, and stellar graphics, *Wild Arms* easily competes with such 16-bit and 32-bit classics as *Chrono Trigger* and *Suikoden*.

Although the story is only slightly above standard fare (you are, once again, in control of a band of outcasts seeking to defend the land they love against hordes of inexplicably evil demons), each character's development is unique because of the individual tasks that they must complete throughout the game. This requires the player to individually control each of the three characters at different points to navigate through certain mazes, which adds a layer of complexity to the gameplay. Also, you'll have to learn all your party's strengths and weaknesses in battle — players can no longer depend solely on a swordsman or mage to get through tough battles, since

characters will find themselves fighting alone in some situations. This feature provides an evenness to the usual RPG "level-building" that can sometimes leave certain characters behind.

Although the storyline leans toward the strictly linear, there's an incredible amount of opportunity for exploration once you reach a certain point in the game. With tons of hidden items, spells, and sub-quests to discover, *Wild Arms* provides the gamer with a hefty challenge. And, let's face it, the game just looks damn good. Everything from the detailed landscape, to the fully polygonal combat scenes, to the fluid movements of the characters on screen, show off features of 32-bit gaming that haven't yet been used in a traditional RPG. The camera angles zoom in and around the battles and keep a usually tedious affair interesting and involving. Even with *Final Fantasy VII* around the corner, *Wild Arms* still packs a strong visual punch that won't soon be forgotten.

Rating: ★★★★★

PlayStation



Rage Racer has the best graphics of the series, but it's mostly a rehash of the previous two

the gameplay and is really the only element in the game that sets it apart from its preceding two titles.

Rage Racer has all the classic elements of Namco's series — the pounding techno music, cheesy but encouraging vocal soundbites, slick power slides — but it ultimately leaves

you with the uneasy feeling of déjà vu. Sure it's a good series, but let's see something new next time.

Rating: ★★★

Rush Hour

Publisher: Psygnosis
Developer: Clockwork Entertainment

Even with the flood of racing games now available for both the PC and consoles, the genre still doesn't feature a lot of variety. *Rush Hour* bucks the trend of rear-view-or-in-the-car racers and offers a unique experience that isn't exactly revolutionary, but is good solid fun.

The "different" racing experience in *Rush Hour* stems from its high-level, top-down view of the cars and tracks. Both the environment and the cars are



Adding a little variety to the racing genre, *Rush Hour* is unique, different, and entertaining

rendered in real-time 3D and feature nicely textured and detailed polygons. The play perspective enables a high frame rate and gives the programmers the added bonus of not having to worry about draw-in problems since the horizon is never visible.

Rush Hour offers two race classes:

the Heavy Metal mode with 4x4 vehicles that move slower but allow more inter-vehicle contact, and High Performance mode that features faster, better handling sports car. The game begins with four tracks, and additional tracks become available as the player masters the game. There is a nice variety to the tracks that all seem to boast at least one sweetly wicked turn. Control is never exceptional but never gets in the way of gameplay, and a well-balanced AI results in races that remain challenging through their entirety. A split-screen, two-player mode is even more enjoyable than the one-player game and adds considerable replay value.

Overall, *Rush Hour* has a definite retrogaming flavor to its gameplay, but its contemporary graphics and execution give the experience new life.

Rating: ★★★

Saturn

Crimewave

Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Core

Besides *Interstate '76* and *Carmageddon* on the PC, few games in recent years have catered to humanity's basic need to blow up the car blocking your way during rush hour. Sure, some fantastic racers are hitting the market, but even Sega doesn't put rocket launchers on the Viper. Eidos's *Crimewave* caters to the aggressive driver in all of us and immerses players in a world where destroying other cars isn't just fun, it's the law.

As a freelance policeman/bounty hunter (Sam & Max gone serious), the player must patrol the city in search of escaping criminals. Using machine guns, rockets, mines, oil slicks, and whatever means necessary, players total the bad eggs. The experience is an exciting modern mixture of classic car games — *APB*, *Roadbusters*, *Autoduel*, and especially *Spy Hunter*.

Smartly designed levels lend realism to *Crimewave*'s premise. Players

can imagine themselves in a simplified blueprint of a real city, albeit one with very pushy drivers.

The control and gameplay variety would make this game highly recommended if only Core had worked a little harder in making them work together. Even after the level has loaded, the CD is accessed every few seconds, which freezes the screen and disturbs the flow of the game. At points, especially in the two-player mode, *Crimewave* becomes almost unplayable. It leaves the player frustrated and transforms it into a merely noteworthy game instead of a classic.

Rating: ★★★

Gundam Gaiden 3

Publisher: Bandai
Developer: Bandai

In the Western gaming world when a company releases a sequel to a game players tend to expect better graphics, a new story, and better gameplay. *Gundam Gaiden 3* only manages one of

the three. As the closing chapter in the trilogy, this title brings a promising beginning to a stumbling anticlimax.

Since *Gundam* fans tend to be otaku (much like Trekkers are in America), Bandai clearly expects its target group to be locked in. This game is for those who bought the first two — and no one else. It chronicles the player's advancement in the Mobile Suit Corps, the final transition from land into space, and the doings of the arch-villain for the whole series in five unimaginative missions.

The graphics remain pretty much unchanged from the first game, complete with a fast but limited 3D engine and some truly boring textures. In the first two levels, you're saddled with endless flat terrain, which is punctuated with occasional square turrets. Later, the layout of the space station adds suspense, but the AI has been dumbed down since the game's second incarnation.

Although marketed as a separate game in Japan, this is nothing more than a glorified expansion pack — and a poor one at that. This is the kind of game that makes you glad the Sega-Bandai merger fell through.

Rating: ★

Metal Slug

Publisher: SNK
Developer: SNK

Like 2D shooters, 2D platformers are not going away any time soon. The genre has been explored so thoroughly that it's part of the basic gaming vocabulary. As a result, the platformer is one of the

few games in which players can appreciate the gameplay and study its aesthetics at the same time, which is one reason SNK's *Metal Slug* is just so fun to play.

Unlike Capcom's *Megaman 8*, *Metal Slug* doesn't depend on nostalgia to compensate for dated gameplay. This is a thoroughly modern game. Utilizing a RAM cart, it loads in more animation and adds more life to its world than most 3D games.

The world is amazingly alive and humorous. *Metal Slug* has players destroying entire villages, cutting enemy throats, and just plain blowing up everything in sight with nary a slowdown. Players who blow up outhouses will find surprised soldiers sitting on the toilet. The action is frantic but always well choreographed.

In the end, *Metal Slug* is not a game players will really obsess over. However, the easy and exciting gameplay will have players returning to it often, which is probably why SNK decided to bring it to the States.

Rating: ★★★



Crimewave's solution to the traffic problem is to give all the cars really big guns



Gundam Gaiden 3 continues the series by using exactly the same engine as the first entry



If you still like platformers, you'll love Metal Slug — it's about as good as these things get

PC

Flaw Wars

The title everyone's been waiting for finally arrives and nearly drops the ball



Whether you want to fly as a rebel hotshot or an Imperial flunky, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter* will show you a good time, but just barely

X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter

Publisher: LucasArts

Developer: LucasArts/ Totally Games

In *Next Generation's* list of the top 100 games of all time (NG 21) the *X-Wing/TIE Fighter* series ranked 23, and the idea of getting a new *Star Wars*-based space combat sim with multiplayer support has had the entire staff (and a hefty percentage of the gaming population) twitching with anticipation. After some frustrating delays, it's finally arrived, after frantically tearing open the box, our reaction is — eh?

Don't get us wrong, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter* is a lot of fun. There's plenty to like here, but a number of equally annoying problems exist. To begin with, as a one-player game, it does little to live up to its heritage. Previous titles in the series were like windows on the *Star Wars* universe with neatly delineated storylines, each mission building on the last, giving the feeling that the player was really involved in the struggle between the rebellion and the Empire. But *XVT* is so welded to its multiplayer premise, it merely offers a batch of unconnected engagements, all of them so generic they can be played from either the Rebel or Imperial sides with little difference.

As a multiplayer game, things perk up a bit thanks to the game's multitude of options: as many as eight players can fly a given mission, choosing sides as they wish, and pilot any craft involved. So whether a player wants to fly



as Rebel dogfighters or Imperial bombers, they can find their spot.

However, this is also where things start to go downhill. *XVT* plays fine over a LAN, but things just crawl over the Internet. The game itself is somewhat buggy, and one's "score" for a given mission seems to have little to do with what actually happened. The graphics are acceptable — they have been upgraded from the original engine, but it's only a slight improvement. No 3D accelerator support exists at all.

On the upside, the redbook soundtrack features John Williams's full orchestra which adds a lot, as does the increased chatter between pilots. Also, most craft have been fitted with missile countermeasures (thank you), and several new craft are available to pilot. In the end, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter* is a good time, especially over a LAN with a bunch of friends, but it's not what it could have, and perhaps should have, been.

Rating: ★★

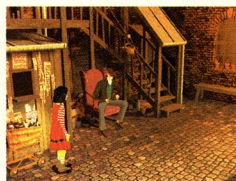
PC

The City of Lost Children

Publisher: Psygnosis

Developer: UGC/D.A. International

Based on the French film of the same name, *The City of Lost Children* is as surrealistic and beautiful as the movie. However, that's where the similarity ends. A PlayStation version of this exists, and little effort seems to have gone into porting it to PC. You might expect to at least use the mouse in traditional adventure game point-and-click-style, but the game is controlled solely by the keyboard, which makes it difficult to move the main character Miette exactly where you wish. To pick up an item, you must stand directly on



The polygon figures look pretty, but *City of Lost Children* leaves much to be desired in gameplay

top of it, a problem when most of the important objects aren't out in plain sight. You'll find yourself looking in every nook and cranny just to make sure you didn't miss something. Even then, the vast majority of items are found almost by accident, which makes the game one big Easter-egg hunt.

However, this pixel search may have been included just to make the game longer. For the hard-core gamer, it might take only a couple of hours to finish the entire adventure. That is, if you can manage to find all the objects. The game is unquestionably gorgeous, with its high-resolution rendered 3D graphics and a multitude of locations. The camera angles are pretty nice, too. But the game as a whole is painful, with so much frustration involved that you might as well look for a walk-through as soon as you start playing.

Rating: ★★

Discworld II: Mortality Bytes!

Publisher: Psygnosis

Developer: Perfect Entertainment

Once again, Psygnosis brings us a graphic adventure that takes its plot, characters,

and humor from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* books. Pratchett has written more than 20 novels, which are huge hits in Europe and growing in popularity here in the U.S. However, the computer game doesn't quite live up to the level of humor, or entertainment, of the novels.

For one thing, the puzzles are particularly difficult if you're not familiar with the books. Many almost require a knowledge of *Discworld*'s peculiar physics and the special properties of many of the world's landmarks. The result is that many puzzles will simply



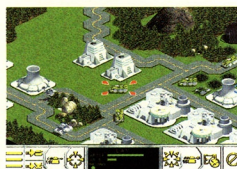
The characters and scenery in *Discworld II* are colorful and quite lighthearted

frustrate rather than challenge most players (two points for the "It's not a bug, it's an undocumented creature" gag though).

The graphics of the game are superb, however. The animation is the best of its kind, with sharp, crisp colors and sparkling scenery. Although Eric Idle's performance as Rincewind, the bumbling wizard who's the main character of the game, may not be perfect, he does manage to wring more than a few chuckles out of the often difficult dialog. Indeed, all the characters are portrayed beautifully by their respective voice actors and the game is rife with Pratchett's British humor, although for every genuine laugh, there seems to be another place where everything just drags.

Ultimately though, if you're not a fan of the books, you'll get frustrated by many of the puzzles. On the other hand, if you are a fan of the books, you might not like how the characters and landscapes are represented. It's rare when a book can be translated well to other media, and the *Discworld* novels are no exception.

Rating: ★★★



Fallen Haven may be pretty, but challenge and fun need to be in there somewhere too

Fallen Haven

**Publisher: Interactive Magic
Developer: Micromeq**

Fallen Haven screams "marketing" — take the tried-and-true concept of aliens battling humans, throw in neutral parties, a couple of interesting units, high-res graphics, a CD soundtrack, and you've got a great strategy game right? Unfortunately, no.

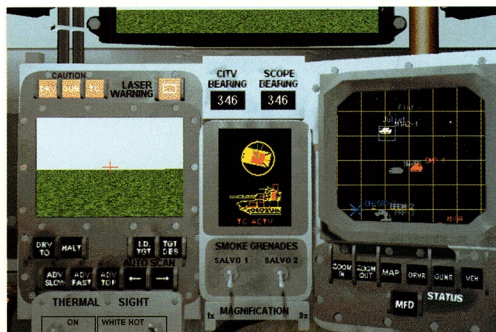
The first, and one of the biggest, disappointments is that the two-player support promised in the demo never materializes. It's not mentioned in the manual (even though there is a screenshot of it), and the readme file simply states, "This option does not exist in the game." This is inexcusable. In fact, it borders on false advertising.

Once players begin, they'll find the game requires little more than building up an army and then attacking en masse. There's very little in the way of resource management: Need more cash? Build another mining facility. Need more energy? Build another power plant. The mines will never run out, and the power plants will never break down. It is possible to decide which unit upgrades to research first, but that's about it.

Which leads to another problem: upgrading current units is one thing, but part of the attraction to this kind of strategy game is the excitement of getting completely new unit types before the enemy. Trouble is, *Fallen Haven* doesn't have an obvious upgrade path. You don't acquire new units by researching or building certain facilities, new unit types are simply awarded after winning a few battles.

In the end, *Fallen Haven* is little more than a good idea with poor implementation. With a few gameplay tweaks and the addition of the two-player option *Fallen Haven* might have been great, but as it stands you're better off sticking with *Civilization 2*.

Rating: ★★



IM1A2 Abrams places the power of America's main battle tank at your fingertips. Wonder if they'll let you take this one through the drive-thru

IM1A2 Abrams

**Publisher: Interactive Magic
Developer: Charybdis Enterprises**

Commanding an Abrams tank, a sleek behemoth of a war machine which forms the heart of modern ground combat, is not a simple point-and-shoot affair. *IM1A2 Abrams* goes a long way toward providing the kind of detail a true sim requires, which is both the game's biggest strength and its biggest weakness.

The design team was headed up by Arnold Hendrick, who gave the world *M1 Tank Platoon* some five years ago and knows tanks. *IM1A2* hinges on the same conceit as *Tank Platoon* — namely, players command a squad of four tanks and can switch between each of the four positions in each tank they control. The tank commander can direct all operations from the unbuttoned (hatch open) or buttoned (hatch sealed) positions. The gunner is responsible for aiming and firing the main weapon, while the driver maneuvers the huge vehicle. In addition to controlling the squadron, players can also access various support units and can call in air strikes or coordinate the movement of other armored vehicles as part of their attack strategy. Numerous configuration options let players customize the game for both skill level and hardware, and it's even possible to run *IM1A2 Abrams* on a 486 in low res.

The game's attention to detail is amazing, but there's the rub: effective play means a lot of juggling. The graphic excellence, solid manual, and multiplayer support make *IM1A2 Abrams* a sim to be reckoned with, but it is a sim through and through. At times, it feels more like a job than a game. The designers went for keeping it true to life, and that means authenticity, not adrenaline.

Rating: ★★

Outlaws

**Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: LucasArts**

What do *Dark Forces* and *Full Throttle* have in common? They were both released by LucasArts. They were both very successful. And, they both contribute elements to *Outlaws*, the latest in the seemingly endless march of first-person shoot-'em-ups, albeit the first we've seen in the old west.

If you've played *Dark Forces*, you've played *Outlaws*. The only



If you like long cut scenes, *Outlaws* has a lot of 'em. More game, less movie please

significant addition to the genre is a hint of realism: weapons do not automatically reload themselves. Instead, the "reload" key must be pressed to replenish the player's ammo supply. This is a bit awkward at first, but becomes second nature by about halfway through the first level. This, however, leads to the major problem of *Outlaws*: by the time the game begins to draw you in, it ends. There are fewer than ten levels, the bulk of which contain far too much backtracking and frustrating hit-hunting.

Outlaws uses the *Dark Forces* engine, and it shows. The graphics are a bit outdated, a bit disorienting, and more than a bit pixelated in close. The game's saving grace is its plot, admittedly an oft-overlooked aspect of this genre. As James Anderson, an Ex-Marshall, players will trek through many different locales, from ordinary towns to precipitous mountain ranges, in search of Anderson's daughter. These levels have no exits — the next level is reached only by killing a boss-type character. These interactions are presented in *Full Throttle*-style cut scenes, which convey the (short) story very well. Oh, well. At least it was fun while it lasted.

Rating: ★★★

Princess Maker 2

**Publisher: Ignite
Developer: Gainax**

Princess Maker 2 is very, very Japanese. Everything about it — its graphic style, its game design, its sexist depiction of women — screams "Made in Japan."

This may catch some PC users off guard, since Ignite (formerly Inscape) is



Calendar of Events

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FRI AUG 1



VIDEOGAMERS.COM



MON AUG 4



TUE AUG 5



WED AUG 6



JUST APPALLING

Meet the crap of the crop, as *SaturnWorld* brings you the baddest of the bad in a 10 category menagerie of the worst games ever.

POLL

A special *Videogamers.com* poll asks you: What video game are you looking forward to the very most?

CHAMPIONSHIP CHESS TOURNAMENT

Compete live against other human opponents in this special *PlaySite* event. Only the best of the best are allowed to play, so the quality of play will be outstanding. 10 PM EDT (7 PM PDT, 3am GMT)

TOUR BANDAI

PSXPower visits games publisher Bandai at its US headquarters. Get a sneak peak of Bandai's upcoming PSX titles, as well as interviews with the guys who bring you the games!

WIN DYNASTY WARRIORS, AND AN ASCII ARCADE STICK

Here's your chance to win the awesome *Dynasty Warriors*, plus the best PSX Arcade stick on the market, courtesy of *Third Generation*.

SUPER Q&A DAY

More than 25 of your most burning videogame questions will be answered in *Next Generation Online's* triple sized Asking section.

NINTENDO THE TOPS?

Is Nintendo fighting the good fight against Sony and Sega? *N64.com* reports on how Nintendo is combating its opponents and how Nintendo will continue to market its 64-bit machine.

THU AUG 7



FRI AUG 8



MON AUG 11



TUES AUG 12



WED AUG 13



THU AUG 14



FRI AUG 15



WORKING DESIGNS DISCOGRAPY

Ultra Game Players Online explores the titles of this remarkable company's past, present, and future.

WIN A PLAYSTATION

PSXPower has a PlayStation to give away, but you know we're going to make you work for it. Take a picture of yourself in a public place proclaiming your love for the PlayStation. We don't care what you do, as long as tons of people know how much you love your PSX!

CHECKERS TOURNAMENT

Test your skills in this live competition. Watch real National Grandmasters (and former champions) duke it out only at *PlaySite*. The best play here! 4 PM EDT (1 PM PDT, 9 PM GMT)

DEMO-LITION DAY

Five hot new PC demos and two Mac demos will be added to the *Next Generation Online* demo library.

JAPANESE FOR GAMERS

From *SaturnWorld* - the top fifty terms every RPG fan should know.

THE NEW CROWD

Who are the new developers looking at making games for Nintendo? What attracts them to making cartridge-based games and what keeps them going?

MEET PC GAMER EDITORS

Come chat with the *PC Gamer* editors, and find out their take on the new slew of games coming out during the Christmas season.

PSYGNOSIS INVASION

Join *Ultra Game Players Online* as it takes over the offices of Psygnosis and goes behind the scenes of some upcoming games!

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64.com
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Every day, one of the seven sites in the Imagine Games Network hosts a special event. These include interviews, chat forums, downloads and extra features. And they're all absolutely free.

All you have to do is to check the times and the dates of the events, and make sure you're there to enjoy them. You'll find the urls of all the sites at the bottom of this page.

AUGUST

All events begin
at 6pm PST



As the Last Refuge for the True Gamer, *SaturnWorld* is dedicated to bringing you the latest information on Sega's premier 32-bit platform, the Saturn. Updated daily, *SaturnWorld* reports on Sega's triumphs and struggles, where it's been, and where it'll strike next, with news, codes, reviews, previews, and the strongest Saturn community this side of the television screen.

BACKGAMMON TOURNAMENT

Jump in and join the Backgammon Tournament at the fastest growing java games site on the web — *PlaySite*. 2 PM EDT (11 AM PDT, 7 PM GMT)

POLL

In a special forum poll. *Third Generation* asks "Which Imagine magazine is your favorite?" A randomly selected winner win a free subscription to the Imagine magazine of their choice.

TUROK II LATEST

N64.com gives its readers the low-down on Acclaim's highly anticipated on Turok 2.

SONIC VS MARIO

Who'd win in a fight? Sonic Versus Mario? Crash Versus Blasto? Who would be toughest? *Ultra Game Players Online* lets you know as we pit mascot against mascot.

SATURNWORLD POLL

In which you vote for the lamest genre of them all...

SPORTS ROUND-UP

Everyone knows the PlayStation has the greatest sports titles by far, but which ones are the all-time best? *PSXPower* takes an in-depth look at all the contenders. As an added bonus, we've got a very special prize to give away: a set of Jack Nicklaus golf clubs. Don't miss it! Here's your chance to win your share of \$3,000 in games, peripherals and more from *Next Generation Online*.

REVERSI TOURNAMENT

That classic game from your youth is available for free at *PlaySite*. Get your name in lights by winning the tournament!

8 PM EDT(5 PM PDT, 1 AM GMT)

MON AUG 25



COOL DRIVING

N64.com aims its critical eye at the overwhelmingly cool library of current and upcoming driving games. Why is this genre revving its engine while the fighting genre seems to be missing the critical titles?

TUES AUG 26



PLAYSTATION CONTROLLER DAY

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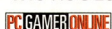
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FRI AUG 29



YOUNGBLOOD CHAT

Special representatives from GT Interactive will be on the palace to chat one-on-one with *PSXPower's* readers about their upcoming real-time strategy game, *Youngblood*, based on IRob Liefeld's popular comic series.



SAT AUG 16



MON AUG 18



TUES AUG 19



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PC

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Researching forbidden technologies yield an advantage, but if you're caught be prepared to pay the price — it can be pretty steep

Emperor of the Fading Suns

Publisher: SegaSoft

Developer: Holistic Design

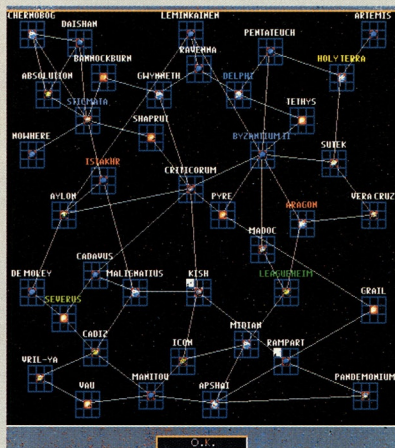
Most strategy games give you a single world to explore and conquer. *Emperor of the Fading Suns* gives you 40. Players start out as the leader of one of five noble houses, vie for the rule of the known worlds, and do whatever it takes to crush their opponents and become Emperor.

Each world is more or less independent of the others at the beginning of the game. Players focus on securing their homeworld, as well as expanding throughout the stars and colonizing other worlds. Resource management plays a big role here — the larger the empire, the more difficult it is to keep everything under control.

At times, *Emperor of the Fading Suns* feels more like one of Avalon Hill's dauntingly complex military board games. Play is turn-based, and combat is played in a style that's oddly reminiscent of, well, a board game: when two units meet, the computer simply calculates their respective strengths and then does the PC equivalent of rolling dice.

Players contend with several intelligent computer opponents, and there are also a number of multiplayer options with up to five players. The game is somewhat unique in that it enables play via e-mail, which is nice because the game is turn-based and time-consuming. Diplomatic relations, both between competing nobles and between nobles and other groups like the merchant guilds and the church, are carried out through a well-

SegaSoft delivers the latest word in turn-based strategy, and it's a keeper



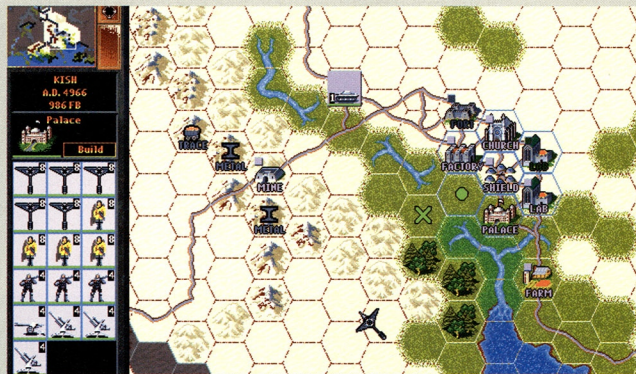
The universe of *Emperor of the Fading Suns* isn't just a big place, it can be a very dangerous place

designed interface and are a major part of gameplay. For example, research of new technologies is a must, but certain "forbidden sciences" bring the wrath of the Inquisition.

With everything from basic combat to diplomatic backstabbing, *Emperor of the Fading Suns* has a depth of play that is worthy of a classic

strategy game. Unfortunately, its biggest strength is also its biggest weakness; while captivating, this is not a game that's easily mastered. Veterans will enjoy the complexity, but the high learning curve may put some folks off. Fans of turn-based strategy, however, need look no further. It's a new classic.

Rating: ★★★★★



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rating

releasing the English language version in the U.S. straight to the PC market, which, unlike the console audience, is by and large not used to nor familiar with Japanese culture or Japanese games. In all probability, the mainstream computer gaming press will take one look at this game, scream "Sexism!" and pan it



Your daughter on vacation in *Princess Maker 2*, watching her weight

accordingly, probably without even giving it a fair shot.

Make no mistake though, this game is pretty unapologetically sexist. You are a hero in some vaguely European court who must raise a nine-year-old daughter, with the ultimate goal of having her become a princess. This neatly glosses over the really tough years of raising a child from infancy, and the girl's mother plays no role in this game whatsoever — the child is given to you at age nine by some demigods. Dutiful father that you are, you must spend your time balancing your daughter's diet (don't make her too chubby, or she'll be unattractive; make her too thin, and she'll die) with her schooling (everything from Religion and Mathematics to Martial Arts and Fencing) and work (ranging from washing, farming, hunting and bricklaying to gravedigging and whoring!).

But if you can somehow get around the ludicrous concept, the game turns out to be a pretty entertaining resource management game, with role-playing and combat elements thrown in for good measure. There are tournaments to win, wildernesses to explore, and a constant struggle to balance your limited income with all of the schooling and various other accoutrements your child needs in order to win favor at the royal court.

As PC games go however, *Princess Maker 2* isn't exactly state of the art. The graphics, while functional, are dated and very simplistic compared to almost any other current title. The adventuring sequences are primitive, resembling 2D RPGs on the Super NES, and the whole installed game is only 12MB.

This is the strangest game to hit the U.S. PC market in years, and on a certain level, *Ignite* should be commended for taking the chance to release it. Whether it can, or maybe even should, find an audience is another matter.

Rating: ★★★

Redneck Rampage

Publisher: Interplay
Developer: Xatrix
Entertainment

"All the killin'." Twice the humor. Half the intelligence." That's what the box says anyway, and it almost tells the truth. *Redneck Rampage* is a first-person shooter based on a tweaked version of the *Duke Nukem* engine. From a pure gameplay standpoint, it doesn't quite measure up to the likes of *Blood*, for example, but it has its good points.

The backstory tells the tale of a couple of, well, rednecks who get their prize-winning pig kidnapped by aliens while coming home from the county fair. In trying to get it back, the player has to fight through some fourteen levels, including a trailer park and chicken-processing plant, using shotguns and such to blast away at an odd assortment of invading aliens and their army of cloned hicks (an



***Redneck Rampage* is one of the funniest titles in years — if only the gameplay lived up to it**

interesting conceit, in that it explains why you're facing hordes of identical looking hillbillies). With a soundtrack featuring Mojo Nixon, The Reverend Horton Heat, and some deep South-twanged voice samples, the game has a lot of atmosphere of a rather peculiar variety, and this is where most of its appeal lies. It presents itself as a *Duke Nukem*-meets-*Deliverance* gore fest, and on that level, it succeeds brilliantly. It is, in a word, a hoot — any game in which using dynamite on one fat Jethro-type enemy turns him into a pile of hamhocks, and calls its invincibility-and-all-weapons-kill cheat "Elvis Mode" certainly has its heart in the right place.

The trouble is in the design and layout of the levels. While everything looks good and has lots of detail, every level is mostly based around the same "find the key, open the door, shoot everything that moves" style of gameplay found in just about every other first-person shooter. As creative as much of this game is, its gameplay is same-old, same-old. It's fun, but when it's over, you're more likely to remember the "Yee-ha"s and health-replenishing whisky bottles instead of any of the challenge or gameplay.

Rating: ★★★

Shivers 2: Harvest of Souls

Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Sierra

The second addition to the *Shivers* *Myst*-clone games, *Harvest of Souls* adds only a few new twists to the otherwise overused and abused puzzle gaming interface. This time, players can look at their surroundings in 360 degrees (similar to *Zork Nemesis*) with the ability to look up and down at certain angles. This helps it feel a bit more immersive, but it's still a game held together by a bunch of logic puzzles that are computer incarnations of something you'd find in the puzzle section of a supermarket magazine shelf. It's a typical story of human abduction with mystical, Native American doomsday portents.

Shivers 2 will appeal to only a certain sect of people — those who

love games like *Myst*, *Jewels of the Oracle*, and, of course, the first *Shivers*. Other than that, most folks should stay away. It might be the best puzzle game of its type, but it's still just a puzzle game that involves lots of mouse-clicking and leaps of logic to uncover its ancient mystery.

Rating: ★★



You never know what you'll discover in *Shivers 2* — if you can care long enough to find anything

Macintosh

F/A-18 Hornet 3.0

Publisher: Graphic Simulations
Developer: Graphic Simulations

The Hornet isn't the newest or flashiest in the skies, and likewise *F/A-18 Hornet 3.0* isn't a revolutionary game. It does provide a bunch of new kicks over the venerable version 2.0, which was one of the most complete and well-received flight sims on the Mac, but it looks similar enough that at a cursory glance you might not notice the difference.

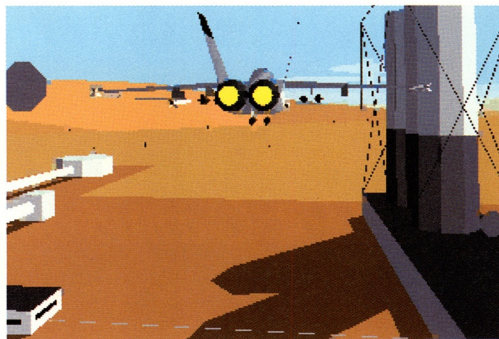
The upgrade has a few tweaks to the mission set from version 2.0, an interactive training guide, true radar masking, and some impressive graphics. Though you won't see any texture-mapping here, the terrain rolls realistically with haze, smoke, and

clouds. It avoids pop-in at up to 1024-by-768, which runs quite smoothly on a mid-range Mac.

Make no mistake, this is not an arcade game: the flight model is as realistic as they come, and dogfights become more a duel of shaking radar lock than anything. The anti-aircraft guns and missiles will take you out if you don't fly low, and computer opponents are no cupcakes either. If smoking silicon pilots isn't enough for you, *Hornet* will network up to four players over an AppleTalk network.

Hornet 3.0 won't make your jaw drop, but it won't leave you feeling ripped off either. With just enough new features to justify the incremental version number increase, it's worth the time of Mac flight fans.

Rating: ★★



Yes, this is *F/A-18 Hornet 3.0*, not 2.0. The difference is in how it plays, not how it looks. It's still one of the best flight sims for the Mac

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rating

Arcade

Hummer
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sega AM2

Sega is the ultimate arcade game developer, cranking out new games almost monthly. However, *Hummer* is an example of an arcade game containing all of the classic stuff that makes a good arcade title, but somehow still manages to not be very much fun.

In this first-person, light-gun game you drive a hummer through the enemy ranks, blow up major constructs, kill infantry, and, basically, shoot everything that moves and most of the things that stand still. What makes *Hummer* stand out is that the same free-moving gatling guns introduced in *Gunblade NY* are used here: two guns with two cross-hairs, one red, one green to differentiate player's shots. To survive through the constant barrages of enemy fire, oncoming helicopters, and jet missiles, gamers must blast away at fuel and ammo crates, which adds challenge and a little strategy, too. The pace is horrifically fast, and you unfortunately don't control your vehicle, which makes for a

certain amount of frustration. Like *Gunblade*, the player's only focus is to shoot, shoot, and shoot until they run out of quarters.

Unfortunately, no matter how skillful the player or how many times they play, it's unlikely they'll ever blast everything because the automatically driven hummer simply moves way too fast and in too many directions. Enemy targets don't necessarily blow up the first time you hit them, either. For whatever reason, these military men and their vehicles are tough, and require at least two to three shots to really nail them good.

While this is obviously part of the challenge, it feels as though you're missing about half the army regardless of efficiency or skill. Adding to this empty feeling is the mindlessness of it all, a problem which plagues all but the best light-gun shooters. Sega's megahit arcade team may crank out lots of great games (and no one does it better), but *Hummer* (like the mediocre *Sky Target* before it) is one that definitely fell through the cracks.

Rating: ★★

Maximum Force
Publisher: Midway
Developer: Atari Games

Even with amazing light-gun shooters such as *Time Crisis* and *Virtua Cop 2* arriving in arcades at the same time, last year's *Area 51*, for many known (and some unknown) reasons, was a runaway commercial hit. Despite its average gameplay and average graphics, the two-player shooter was everywhere, and everybody played it.



Neutral physically gifted women and doctors in white add to the challenge of Maximum Force

So what's a company gonna do? Make a completely different light-gun shooter and buck the trend? Hey, what radioactive waste truck did you fall off of? *Maximum Force* is *Area 51* with a slightly faster engine, cleaner, crisper graphics, more imaginative settings, and worse acting. The game features the same automatic camera to lead you through each of the three missions and varies the scenery a bit by including jungle sequences, an underwater mini-sub excursion, elevator and escalator rides, and a rooftop finale.

About 99% of the light-gun shooters out now resemble the once-original *Lethal Enforcers*. While the formula isn't terrible, without new wrinkles this kind of game is a real bore. Games like this, in fact, make you really appreciate polygon enemies of *Virtua Cop* or the foot pedal in *Time Crisis*. *Maximum Force* puts a new face on the same old game, and while it's tempting to say that it gets away with it, in the end, it really just doesn't.

Rating: ★★

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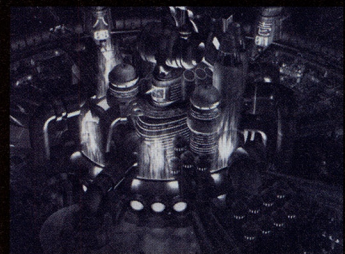
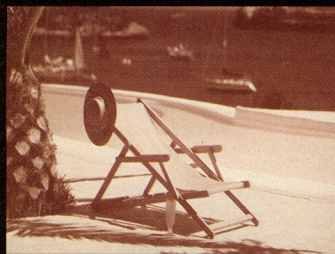
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Letters

Exercise your writes

I am writing in response to Patrick Bass's letter in **NG 30** about shopping around for lower game prices. I agree, we should be buying games for the lowest prices possible. However, this does not mean that you have to buy from the non-specialty retailers. I get the lowest prices available by buying all my games from Electronics Boutique. EB will price match any local competitor who has the game in stock. On top of that, you can get a frequent-buyer card that saves you an additional 5%. Not only is EB agreeing to match the lowest price, with the card they are *beating* it. The store will also let you return an opened game within 10 days if you don't like it. If anyone has ever tried to return an opened game to Wal-Mart for any reason you know what a great service the EB return policy is to the consumer. Try asking the employees at the big retail stores anything about a game. Nine times out of ten they won't know a thing about it. At a specialty retailer you can rest assured that you can get good, accurate information about games from people who care about games. The specialty retailer has

sunk all bets on the videogame industry, and as gamers we should support them.

Steve DeWalle
SDewalle@aol.com

Thanks. Which EB do you work at again? Just kidding. Point taken.

In **NG 30**, you asked what readers think about the star-rating system. I know that when I look at a review of a game I am thinking of buying. I don't look at the star rating to see what the reviewer thought. I read the text — only by doing so will I know the true merits of the game (or lack thereof). Stars do not tell me this. In the same vein, I don't use the **NG Gamers Guide** — again, the stars don't tell me anything about how the game plays. If I'm interested in buying an older game, I simply refer to my back issues or download a review off your web site. Let other magazines have their stars and happy faces — your magazine doesn't need them, and neither do gamers who think for themselves.

Kelly Mummert
knum@ix.netcom.com

Let's hear from another reader before we reply. Lawrence...

I am in favor of no stars. For example: The original *Ridge Racer* got three stars and the recent *Rage Racer* also received three stars. Although they have the same rating, stating that *Rage Racer* is a worthy addition featuring excellent gameplay and noticeable improvement implies to me that they shouldn't get the same rating.

Lawrence Marinas
lqtk15b@prodigy.com

We'd like to make two points. First, we've never asserted that games with the same ranking are equally fun — it would be insane to suggest that only five quality levels exist! The ratings are meant to provide a quick and general impression. All three-star games are "solid and competitive examples of an established game style," but that doesn't mean one can't be better than another. The text of the review is more important than the rating.

Unfortunately, our *Gamers Guide* encouraged people to judge games on stars alone, so we've killed it. Instead, the *Next Generation Disc* now has a complete searchable database with the full text of every review we've ever done. This should help stop the confusion. Finally, readers shouldn't be surprised to see a new version of an old game get a lower rating. Why? When "Game X" comes out, it may be "revolutionary" — a new high watermark," that is, a five-star game. When the same game comes out two years later, it is quite likely that that version, even if it plays the same, is now "a solid and competitive example of an established game style," worth only three stars. The issue number is given with each review on the

database. Let us know what you think. We're constantly looking to improve, and your input helps. For now, though, the stars stay — we feel that as a quick reference, they are valuable.

In your response to Oliver Streull's letter in **NG 30**, you said, "As gaming reaches a larger segment of the market, perhaps it's inevitable it will go the way of movies and television: a sea of popular products with flashy production values and little depth, and only occasional worthwhile titles." While I couldn't agree more, your response got me thinking. In movies, as well as in music, another medium that has taken a similar path, there is always an alternative: independents. Independent movies and music represent the cutting edge — the deepest and most original examples of their respective art.

So what is stopping an independent movement within gaming? All the pieces are there, just waiting to fall into place: with the current trend in retrogaming, people are realizing that graphics aren't nearly as important to gaming satisfaction as gameplay; as mentioned in the July issue, producers and programmers are often in a state of envy of the old days when a couple of people could churn out a great game.

Perhaps most importantly, the Yaroze program offers a cheap platform for development, although currently publishing is impossible. Just as in movies, indies wouldn't need to sell tons to make money. If something costs next-to-nothing to produce, then making just a little more than next-to-nothing would produce a profit. With the current lack of originality, indies could be a real answer.

Kazin@aol.com



Ridge Racer (top) and Rage Racer (bottom) both received three stars, but of course there are differences, not the least of which is time of release

corresponding

Kazin has laid down the gauntlet, who'll pick it up? Although we should note that the PC industry already has an excellent "indy" distribution mechanism in place: shareware. But the advent of Net Yaroze provides an opportunity for console indies to arise.

I read NG 30's article regarding the "unfair" comparisons of videogame and movie prices. A movie costs \$7.00 to see, but a game can be rented for only \$3.00 and played all day.

Let's look at the value. If you buy a videogame for \$60.00 and it takes let say 60 hours to complete, you have paid \$1.00 per hour for interactive entertainment. And you still own the videogame. On the other hand, if you were to rent 30 movies (remember rentable movies are now old news, compared to your brand new state of the art videogame) at \$3.00 each and the movies are 2 hours long, you have paid \$90.00 for 60 hours of non-interactive entertainment, or \$1.50 per hour. And, the movies must be returned, unlike the videogame you own. Thanks for listening.

Jim Bogle
e-mail withheld

If only every \$60 videogame provided 60 hours worth of entertainment. Thanks for the letter.

Your article "Is your favorite game company ripping you off?" in the NG 30 includes the following statement: "When a third-party publisher has developed a game, it must hand the code over to the hardware manufacturer who then charges to manufacture the finished discs and charges a royalty for every unit sold."

How is this legally possible? I can't imagine a similar situation with any other product: GM can't charge royalties to makers of tires or car batteries and VCR manufacturers can't charge movie makers a fee for every tape. It seems that they would be open to charges of restraint of trade for this practice.

Mark Bordas
Mark.Bordas@East.Sun.COM

It's simple — you don't have to pay a royalty if you can crack the encryption code (as some unlicensed third parties did, legally and otherwise, on the NES and Genesis). If you can't, well, it's time to cough up around \$10 per disc for the "right" to publish on a given platform, not to mention the additional production costs.

I wanted to comment on "Is your favorite game company ripping you off?" Your article was fair but passed over some points that need to be said. While game companies may invest lots of money into development costs, the money goes to more than one project. Nintendo spent \$30 million dollars to produce *Mario 64*. They did not throw away the millions of dollars of Silicon Graphics workstations to render *Mario* so they could purchase new systems for *Mario Kart 64*'s renderings. All of Nintendo's in-house 3D renderings probably all use those same machines. Look at *Id* software. *Doom* was a fantastic game in every respect and well worth the invested money to buy the game. However, the programmers now slightly improve games and resell them for full price; *Doom II* is a classic example, as are *Hexen* and *Heretic*. These are essentially the same games with slight variances. Is it fair to say that *Id* took a risk in releasing *Doom II*?

Even though it's almost the same game as *Doom*, it was sure to succeed. This trend continues in every market. The *Space Quest/Kings Quest/Police Quest* game engine, the *Ultima/Crusader* series, and so on. New packaging, new art, a tweak, and a new sound set is all it takes. And the rest is pure profit. We all want to see our favorite games improved, but I think full price on revisited titles should be stopped.

Kevin J Baird
fiz@cyberdrive.net

You bring up an interesting point. One economic theory suggests that when we pay for an incremental upgrade to a product (Word 97, *Doom II*), we are really subsidizing



Nintendo may have used the same machines for *Mario 64* and *Mario Kart 64* — who knows? Keeping up with technology is expensive

the cost of the first product — that is, if a company had no expectation of ever being able to reuse technology and equipment then the initial price would be much higher. In the old days, game development cycles were measured in weeks, and \$30 was enough to cover future costs (and piracy). Now, \$30 may just be getting what the company considers the first installment in a long-term purchase plan.

All videogame magazines have been stating that almost every new 3D game has "better" graphics than games made before it. This means the games have high polygon count, anti-aliasing, bi-linear texture filtering, less pop up, and so on. The notion that the artwork is better or worse has no bearing on the declaration the graphics are "better." Please rectify this situation.

Recent cases in point include the Konami Cobra games, which all supposedly have better graphics than the Model 3 games. I think the Model 3 games are expertly composed, use colors that make a scene come alive, and have real thought to character designs. The Cobra game has textures that looked like bland unaltered photo scans, with a world that was trying to look realistic, without really trying to look interesting. There seemed to be no sense of art design.

sinenic@rabident.com

Excellent point. Next Generation has always tried to distinguish between art and art direction and graphics. A game may have great art but mediocre graphics (*Day of the Tentacle*), or fine graphics but mediocre art (*Criticom*). The words "graphics" and "art" are not synonymous (especially when discussing the current wave of PC 3D engines!).

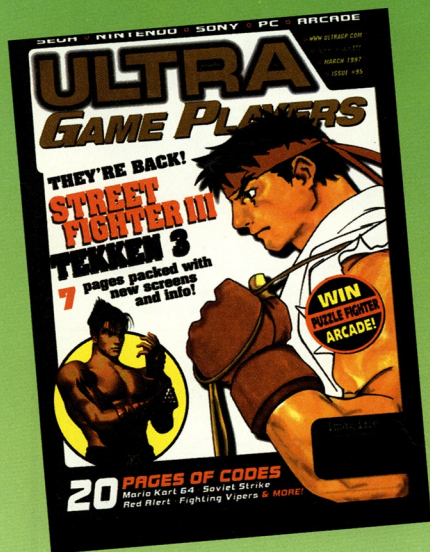
Three weeks ago I went to Seattle GameWorks at about 9:30 pm. I was carded. Since it was after 8:00 and I was under 18, I was not allowed in. I have enjoyed and supported the industry since before kindergarten, so I felt betrayed. It was explained that it was so they could serve more alcohol (and make more money). I think that it is rotten the way they turn their back on the younger generation looking for something to do on a Saturday night. I'll go to other arcades where the base price for a game isn't 75¢.

Kenzan Tsutakawa-Chinn
Michaeco@msn.com

GameWorks may succeed in courting the older generation, but no doubt they'll alienate many younger, future consumers. We'd like to advise getting a fake ID, but our lawyers wouldn't let us. Last time we were there, though, it sure seemed like an enterprising person could sneak in through the exit near the movie theater...

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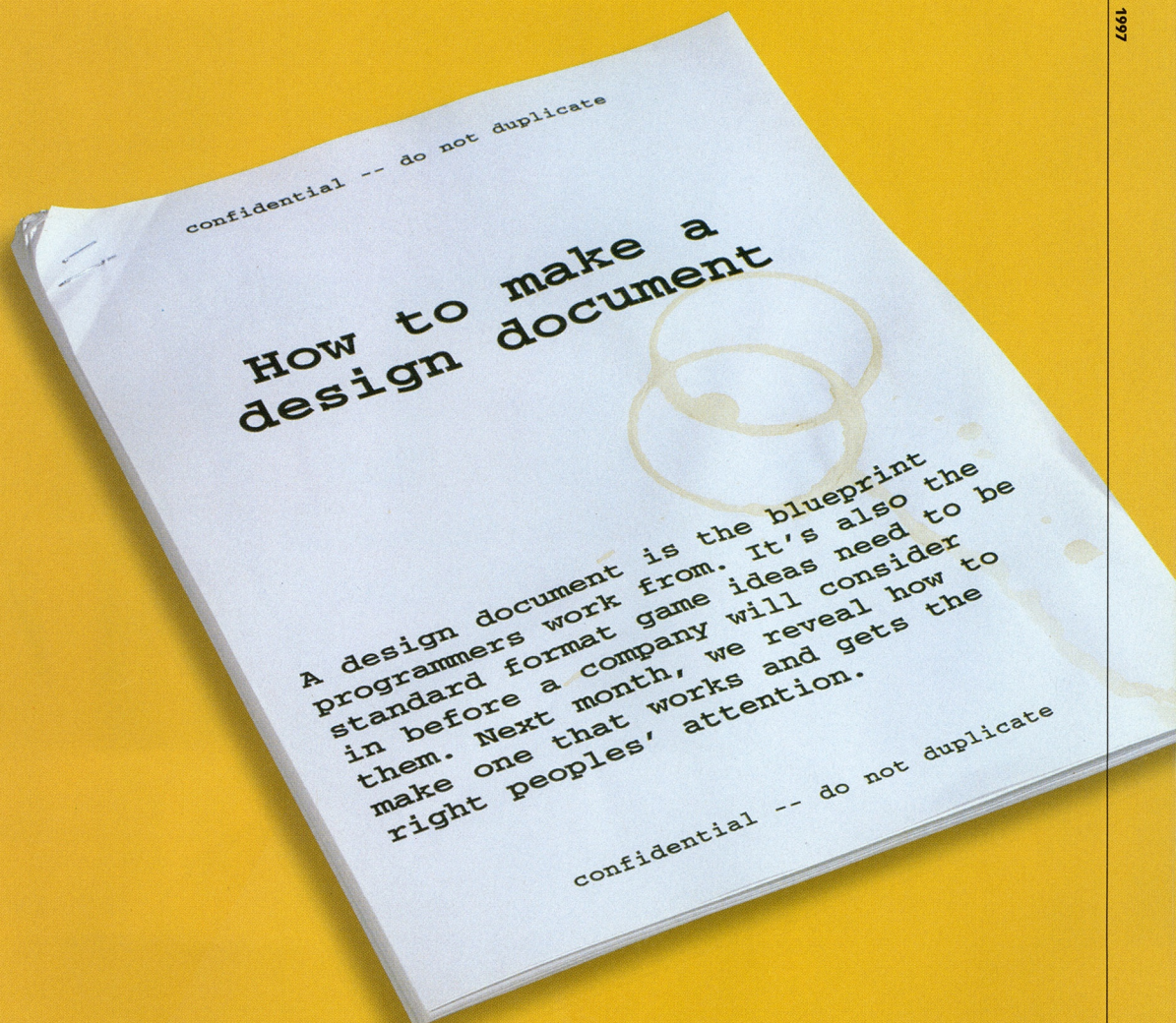
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